NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING SERIES

BRIAN JACQUES

MATTIMEO

A Tale from Redwall

MATTIMEO

REDWALL BOOK 3

High noontide sun beat down on Orlando the Axe. The mighty badger strode the far reaches of the western plains, blind to the beauty of the flower-carpeted grassland which had turned green to gold.

Orlando the Axe was following the fox.

The badger wiped a huge dusty paw across his eyes. Sun gtinted off the massive double-headed battleaxe slung over his shoulder. His home lay plundered behind him; there was nothing left there except desolation and loneliness.

Orlando the Axe was following the fox.

Two sunrises ago he had passed the strange fox and his band. They had given him a wide berth as he trudged to the foothills of the mountains, seeking food and the small rock plants which his little daughter Auma loved so much. Orlando {eared no living creature. He had

passed by the fox, not thinking that he had left a dear trail back to his den. The following morning he had returned home, laden with food and rock flowers. Auma was gone, his home was smashed and broken.

Orlando the Axe was following the fox.

Three winters ago his wife Brockrose had died, leaving him to rear their little badger cub. Auma was the most precious dung in Orlando's life. He -taught her of the seasons, the plains and the mountains. Now he had

turned his back on those same mountains and plains with only one thing in his mind: to find his daughter and the creature who had taken her.

Orlando the Axe was following the fox.

Striding the wide spaces, the badger let a fearsome rumble start to build deep within his cavernous chest, a terrible sound that grew into a howling roar of pent-up rage and anger. It rebounded to the mountains across the sunlit plain as he shook the battleaxe aloft with one paw, his eyes narrowed to red bloodshot slits which changed the whole world crimson in front of him,

Orlando the Axe was following the fox!

BOOK ONE

Slagar the Cruel

10

From the diary of John Churchmouse, historian and recorder of Redwall Abbey in Mossflower country.

We are dose to the longest day of this season, the Summer of the Golden Plain. Today I took up my ledger and quill to write. It was cool and dim in the quiet of my little study indoors, With a restless spirit Isat, quill in paw, listening to the merry din outside in the sunlit cloisters of our Abbey. I could no longer stand the solitude, that happy sound of revelry drew me outside, yet there was still my recorder's duties to catch up with. Taking ledger and quill, I went out, up the stairs to the top of the outer wall, directly over the Warrior's Cottage, which is the gatehouse at the threshold of Redwall Abbey.

What a glorious day! The sky, painted special blue far the summer, had not a cloud or shadow anywhere, the hot eye of the sun caused bees to drone lazily, while grasshoppers chirruped and sawed endlessly. Out to the west, the great plains stretched away, shimmering and dancing with heat waves to the distant horizon, a breathtaking carpet of kingcup and dandelion mingled with cowslip; never had we ever seen so many yellow blossoms. Abbot Mordalfus named it the Summer of the Golden Plain. What a wise choice. 1 could see him ambling round the corner by the bell tower, his

habit sleeves rolled well up, panting as he helped young woodlanders to carry out forms for seating at the great feast, our eighth season of peace and plenty since the wars.

Otters swam lazily in the Abbey pond, culling edible water plants (but mostly gambolling and playing. You know what otters are like). Small hedgehogs and moles were around the back at the east side orchard. I could hear them singing as they gathered ripening berries or collected early damsons, pears, plums and apples, which the squirrels threw down to them from the high branches. Pretty little mousemaids and baby voles tittered and giggled whilst choosing table flowers, some making bright posies which they wore as hats. Frequently a sparrow would thrum past my head, carrying some morsel it had found or caught (though 1 cannot imagine any creature but a bird eating some of the questionable items a sparrow might find). The Foremole and his crew would arrive shortly to dig a baking pit. Meanwhile, the bustle and life of Redwall carried on below me, framed at the back by our beloved old Mossflower Woods. High, green and serene, with hardly a breeze to stir the mighty fastness of leafy boughs, oak, ash, elm, beech, yew, sycamore, hornbeam, fir and willow, mingled pale, dusty, dark and light green hues, the varied leaf shapes blending to shelter and frame the north and east sides of our walls.

Only two days to the annual festivities. I begin to feel like a giddy young woodlander again! However, being historian and recorder, I cannot in all dignity tuck up the folds of my habit and leap down among the merrymakers. I will finish my writings as quickly as possible then. Who knows, maybe I'll stroll down to join some of the elders in the cellar. I know they will be sampling the October ale and blackcurrant wine set by from other seasons, just to make sure it has kept its taste and temperature correctly, especially the elderberry wine of last autumn's pressing. You understand, of course, that I am doing this merely to help out old friends.

John Churchmouse (Recorder of Redwall Abbey, formerly of

Saint Ninian's)

Afternoon sunlight slanted through the gaps in the ruined walls and roof of Saint Ninian's old church, highlighting the desolation of weed and thistle growing around broken, rotted pews. A small cloud of midges dispersed from dizzy circling as Slagar brushed by them. The fox peered through a broken door timber at the winding path of dusty brown which meandered aimlessly southward to meet the woodland fringe on the eastern edge.

Slagar watched silently, his ragged breath sucking in and out at the purple-red diamond-patterned skull mask which covered his entire head. When he spoke, it was a hoarse, rasping sound, as if he had received a terrible throat injury at some time.

"Here they come. Get that side door open, quick!" A long coloured cart with rainbow-hued covering was pulled into the church by a dozen or so wretched creatures chained to the wagon shaft. A stoat sat on the driver's platform. He slashed at the haulers savagely with a long thin willow withe. "Gee up, put yer backs into it, me beauties!" The cart was followed by a rabble of ill-assorted vermin: stoats, ferrets and weasels, garbed the same as their comrades who were already waiting with Slagar.

They wore broad doth sashes stuffed with a motley assortment of rusty daggers, spikes or knives. Some carried spears and curious-looking single-bladed axes. Slagar the Cruel hurried them along.

"Come on, shift your hides, get that door back in place quick!"

The driver jumped down from the cart.

"They're all here, Slagar," he reported, "'cept fer that otter. He wasn't strong enough to carry on, so we finished 'im off an' chucked his carcass in the ditch, then covered it with ferns. The ants an' insects'll do the rest."

The hooded fox gave a bad-tempered snort. "So long as you weren't spotted by any creature. News travels fast in Mossflower. We've got to stay hidden now until Vitch gets back."

The twelve captives chained to the wagon shaft, mice, squirrels, voles, a couple of small hedgehogs and a young female badger, were in an emaciated condition.

One of them, a squirrel only a few seasons old, moaned piteously. "Water, please give me water."

The stoat who had been acting as driver swung his willow cane viciously at the unfortunate squirrel.

"Water? I'll give you water, you little toad. How about a taste of cane, eh? Take that!"

Slagar stepped on the end of the cane, preventing the stoat swinging it further. "Halftail, you idiot, what d'you want, slaves to sell or a load of dead flesh? Use your brain, stoat. Give the beast a drink. Here, Scringe, give 'em all a drink and some roots or leaves to eat, otherwise they'll be fit for nothing."

The ferret called Scringe leapt to do Sugar's bidding.

Halftail tugged at the willow cane to free it from Slagaiˆs paw. The hooded fox held down harder so the stoat could not budge it.

"Now then, Halftail, me bucko, I think you're getting a bit deaf lately. I thought I told you to keep inside the woods with that cart?"

Halftail let go of the cane. "Aye, and so I did, wherever

possible," he said indignantly. "But have you tried hauling a cart and twelve slaves through that forest out there?"

Slagar the Cruel picked up the willow cane, the hood coming tight about his jaws with a sharp intake of breath. "You forget yourself, stoat. I don't have to try hauling carts, I'm the boss around here. When I looked up that path a short time ago, I saw you coming up the

center of the road as if you hadn't a care in the world, bold as brass in broad daylight. Do you realize that a sentry could have seen your dust from the top of Redwall Abbey?"

Halftail failed to recognize the danger signals. "Yah, whaf s the difference," he shrugged. "They never saw anything."

Slagar swung the cane furiously and Halftail screamed in agony. He huddled down against the side of the cart, unable to avoid the rain of stinging cuts showering on his head, shoulders and back.

"I'll tell you the difference, slimebrain. The difference is that you don't talk back to me. I'm the leader. You'll learn that or I'll flay your hide to doUrags!" Sugar's voice grated harshly with each slash of the whipping willow.

"Whaaah mercy, ooh owow! Please stop! No more, Chief!"

SUgar snapped the cane and threw it scornfully at the stoafs heavily welted head.

"Ha, your hearing seems a little better now. Cut yourself another switch. That one's worn out."

The masked fox whirled upon his band of slavers. They sat in cowed silence. The silken hood stretched around his face as he leaned forward.

"That goes for all of you. If anyone ruins my plan, that creature will wish he'd taken his life swiftly with his own paw, by the time I'm through with him. Understand?"

There was a murmured growl of assent.

Slagar climbed up into a ruined window frame. He sat gazing in the direction of Redwall Abbey.

"Scringe, bring me some decent food and a flask of wine from the cart," he commanded.

The servile ferret ran to obey his master.

"Threeclaws, station yourself outside at twilight. Keep an eye peeled for Vitch coming back."

The weasel saluted. "Righto, Chief."

The afternoon wore on, peaceful and golden. Now and then a small dust devil swirled on the path with the

summer heat.

Slagar ran a paw tenderly over the silk harlequin-patterned hood, smiling beneath it as a plan of revenge against Redwall revolved slowly in his twisted mind.

Vengeance had kept him going for a long time now. Sometimes he actually savoured the burning lances of pain that coursed through his face, knowing the day was approaching when he would pay back those he considered responsible for his injuries.

A beetle trundled out of the pitted, rotten woodwork of the window frame. Slagar the Cruel pierced it neatly with a single claw, watching the insect writhe in its death throes. "Redwall, heeheeheehee!" The fox's laughter sent shudders through every creature present.

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"Mattimeo, Mattimeo!"

Cornflower wrung her paws distractedly. She took one last look around Cavern Hole before climbing the stairs to Great Hall. It was quiet and cool in the Abbey's largest room. Shafts of sunlight, multi-coloured from the stained-glass windows, lanced downwards, etching small

pools of rainbow-hued light on the ancient stone

floor.

The mouse wandered outside, murmuring beneath her breath as she bustled along, "Where has the tittle snip gone this time, I wonder? Oh, Matti, you'll have me grey before my time."

John Churchmouse was climbing rather stiffly down from the west wall stairs with his book and quill. He almost bumped into Cornflower as she crossed the

grounds.

"Afternoon, ma'am. My, my, you look busy." Cornflower sat upon the bottom step and heaved a huge sigh. She fanned her whiskers with her paw. "Busy isn't the word for it, Mr. Churchmouse. I've spent the last hour looking for that son of mine. You haven't seen him, by any chance?"

The kindly recorder patted Cornflower's paw. "There, Acre, don't you worry your head, ma'am. If your tittle

Matti is anywhere, he'll be with my Tim and less. Young rips, they were supposed to be helping Brother Rufus to write out place names for the table. Ha, there he is now. Hi, Rufus, seen anything of Tim, Tess or young Matti

lately?"

Brother Rufus strode across, shaking his head. He waggled a scroll of birchbark parchment at them both.

"Ruined!" he exclaimed. "Just look at this list they're supposed to have written. I can't possibly use any of this forplace settings. Look, Abbot Mordalfus, speltwithone *b,' Basil Stag Hare, you'd think that was simple enough. Oh no, they've spelt Basil 'BazzerT and put an V on the

end of Stag!"

John Churchmouse pulled forth a kerchief. He blew his snout loudly to disguise the laughter that was shaking him. "Hmm, yes, ahaha. 'Scuse me, well, that wouldn't have been my Tess, you know. She's quite good at the spelling."

Brother Rufus rolled the parchment tightly. "If s that little Mattimeo, he's the ringleader. I know you may not like that, Cornflower marm, but it's the truth!" His voice was shrill with frustration.

Cornflower nodded her head sadly. "Yes, I'm afraid I must agree with you, Brother Rufus. Matti is becoming a real problem. I daren't tell his father half the things he

gets up to."

John Churchmouse peered sympathetically over the top of his square eyeglasses. "Maybe it'd be better to do so, if you'll excuse me for saying. Young Matti will have to start growing up sometime if he ever hopes to become the Warrior of Red wall like his father Matthias. Mattimeo will have to start behaving responsibly instead of going about like a spoilt brat, if you'll pardon the expression,

ma'am."

Cornflower stood up. "I know exactly what you mean. Mr. Churchmouse, but we may be judging Matti a little unfairly. After all, he does have quite a lot to live up to, being the son of Redwall's Warrior. Besides, practically

every woodlander within our walls has spoiled him since the day he was born."

Both John and Rufus nodded their heads in agreement.

The awkward silence which followed was immediately broken by a band of small creatures headed by a young mole who waved his digging daws wildly.

"Cumm yurr quickly, gennelrnice, 'asten ee. Li'1 Matti be a-slayin' Vitch. Do 'urry!"

Even though the little creature was speaking in the quaint and complicated molespeech, they understood the urgency of his message.

"Where, where?" they cried. 'Take us there quickly!"

The group dashed around the south Abbey gable, taking the shortcut to the east grounds.

Cornflower picked up her skirts, narrowly avoiding collision with a baby hedgehog. Brother Rufus was out in front.

Jess Squirrel was first on the scene. She had been up an apple tree in the orchard with her son Sam when they heard the screams. Travelling from bough to bough, swift as a bird in flight, Jess dropped to the ground and set about trying to separate the two creatures locked together on the grass. They rolled, kicked, spat and bit furiously. Sam dropped down to his mother's aid. They grabbed one each and held them apart. As they did, the crowd arrived.

Mattimeo was panting heavily. He tried to break free, but Jess shook him soundly by the scruff.

"Be still, you little ruffian, or I'll tan your hide!" she warned him.

Sam held tight to the other mouse, Vitch, who looked more like a rat, small though he was. Vitch was not struggling. He looked quite relieved that the fight had been stopped.

John Qmrchmouse strode firmly between them. "Now then, what's all this about, eh?"

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"He called me a skinny little rat."

"He said I was not a warrior's son."

"He pulled my tail and he jumped on me and bit me

and"

"Silence!"

Every creature present froze at the booming growl of a huge grey female badger. Constance, the mother of all Redwall, stood high on her hind legs, towering above mem. Folding her front paws judiciously, she glared down at the two small miscreants.

"Vitch, is it? Well, Vitch, you are a newcomer to our Abbey, but that is no excuse for fighting. We are peaceable creatures at Redwall. Violence is never the answer to a quarrel. What have you got to say for

yourself?" The ratlike mouse wiped a smear of blood from his

snout.

"It was Mattimeo," he whined piteously. "He hit me first, I wasn't doing anything, I was just. . ."

Vitch's faltering excuses faded to a whimper under the badger's stern gaze. She pointed a blunt paw at him.

"Go to the kitchens. TeU Friar Hugo that I sent you. He will set you to sweeping floors and scrubbing pans. I will not have fighting in the Abbey, nor whimpering, whining and trying to put the blame upon others. Brother Rufus, take him along, see he delivers my message to Friar Hugo properly."

Vitch looked as if he were about to dodge off, until Brother Rufus caught him firmly by the ear and marched

him away.

"Come on, young Vitch, greasy pots and floor scrubbing will do you the world of good."

"Owowooch, leggo, you big bully," Vitch protested. "You're pulling my ear off!"

When Vitch had gone, Constance turned upon the other culprit. Jess had released Mattimeo. He stood shamefaced, kicking at a dump of turf, looking down at his paws. He did not see the nod which passed between

his mother and Constance. Cornflower was giving her silent permission to the badger; Mattimeo was in for a dressing-down.

"Son of Matthias the Warrior, look at me!" Constance commanded.

Sheepishly the young mouse gazed upward until he was staring into Constance's unblinking dark eyes. The onlookers stood silent as the matriarch gave the young mouse a piece of her mind.

"Mattimeo, this is not the first time I have had cause to speak with you. I am not going to ask you for an explanation, because in this case I do not think you could justify yourself, Vitch is a newcomer, hardly arrived here. You were bom at Redwall, you know the rules of our Abbey: to live in peace with others, never to harm another creature needlessly, to comfort, assist, and be kind to all."

Mattimeo's lip quivered, he looked as if he were about to speak, but the badger's stern gaze silenced him.

"Today you took it upon yourself to attack another creature who is a guest in our home," Constance continued, her voice an accusing knell. "You, the son of my old friend Matthias the Warrior, who fought to bring peace to Mossflower. Mattimeo, I will not give you any tasks to do as a punishment. The sorrow and worry you cause your mother and the shame you bring down upon your father are the penalties that will rest on your own head. Go now and speak with your father."

Mattimeo's head drooped low as he stumbled off.

Tess, Tim and Sam Squirrel kept silent. They knew that every word Constance spoke was the truth. Mattimeo's middle name should have been trouble.

23

The new moon was up. It hung like a fresh-minted coin in a still, cloudless sky of midnight blue. Moths fluttered vainly upward, only to drift spiralling down to the grass-carpeted woodland floor. The trees stood like timeless sentinels. Somewhere a nightjar serenaded the soft darkness.

Threeclaws was alert at his sentry post. He spied the figure of Vitch approaching and gave a low whistle.

The undersized rat looked up. "Where's Slagar and the others?" he asked.

Threeclaws pointed with his dagger. "Inside the church. Whaf ve you been doing to yourself?"

"Keep your snout out of my business, fatty," said Vitch, dodging nimbly past Threeclaws into the church.

Weasels and a few ferrets and stoats lay about sleeping on the floor. Slagar sat with his back against the painted cart. He scowled at Vitch.

"You took your time getting here. What in the name of the fang kept you?"

Vitch flung himself wearily on a tattered hassock. "Washing dirty pots and greasy pans, scrubbing floors and generally getting meself knocked about."

Slagar crouched forward. "Never mind all that. I put you in there to do a job. When is the feast to begin?"

"Oh that. One more moonrise, then the early evening following."

"Right, did you fix the bolts on the small north wall-gate?" asked Slagar.

"Of course. That was the first thing I attended to. They're well greased and fit for a quick getaway. You can keep that Redwall place, Slagar. I'm not goin' back there again."

"Oh, why's that, Vitch?" The fox's voice was dangerously gentle.

"Huh, it was hard enough tryin' to pass meself off as a mouse. That young one, wotsisname? Matty something - he smelt a rat right away. I had a fight with the little nuisance. He's strong as an otter. Then I was pulled up by a big badger. She gave me a right old teliin' off. Peaceful creatures, my front teeth! I was lugged off and made to scrub dirty pots for some fat old cook. He had me up to my tail in greasy dishwater, standin' over me and makin' me scour and d"

"Ah shut your trap and stop snivelling, rat. This little mouse, was he called Mattimeo, son of Matthias the Warrior?"

"Aye, thaf s him, but how do you know?"

Slagar touched the red silk skull cover, baring his fangs viciously. "Never mind how I know. He's the one we'll be taking away with us, him and any others we can lay our paws on."

Vitch brightened up. "Maybe I'll get a few minutes alone with Mattimeo after we make our getaway, when he's chained up good and proper."

Slagar watched the small rafs face approvingly. "Ha, you'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"Heehee, like it, I'd love it!" Vitch's eyes shone malevolently.

The fox leaned closer. "Vengeance, that's the word. I tell you, rat, there's nothing in the world like the moment when you have your enemy helpless and you can take revenge."

Vitch was puzzled. "I can't imagine a little mouse like that being able to hurt you, Sly One. What did he do that you seek revenge upon him?"

Slagar had a faraway look in his eyes, and beneath the mask his breath hissed roughly.

'It was his father, the Warrior, that big badger too - in fact, it was all the creatures at Redwall who hurt me. The little one was not even born then, but I know how they all dote on him. He is the son of their warrior, the hope of the future. I can kill a lot of birds with one stone by taking Mattimeo. You couldn't imagine the agonies they'd go through if he went missing. You see, I know the woodlanders of that Abbey. They love their young and they'd rather be made captive themselves than have anything happen to their precious little ones. This is what wul make my revenge all the sweeter."

Suddenly Vitch stretched a paw towards Slagar's masked face. "Did they do that to you? Is that why you have to wear a mask over your head? Why don't you take it o Aaaarrrggghh!"

Slagar seized Vitch's paw and bent it savagely backwards. "Don't you ever dare put your grubby paw near my face again, or I'll snap it dean off and make you eat it, rat! Now get back to that Abbey and keep your eyes open. Make sure you know exactly where that young mouse

is at all times, so that I can put my paw on him when the moment arrives."

He released Vitch and the small rat huddled on the ground, sobbing. Slagar spat on him contemptuously. "Get up, misery guts. If you're still lying there in a moment, you'U feel my sword. That really will give you something to moan about."

Vitch picked himself up slowly and painfully. Next moment he was sent hurtling by a kick on the behind from Slagar.

"Gam! Get yourself out of my sight, you snivelling snotface."

Vitch departed hastily, leaving Slagar to take his ease

once more. The Cruel One lay back, all thoughts of sleep banished by one word which echoed around his twisted mind like an eerie melody. Revenge!

26

Matthias the Warrior of Redwall stood with his back to the empty fireplace. Cornflower had gone out early to help with the baking. Golden morning sunlight streamed through the windows of the small gatehouse cottage, glinting off the dewy fruit piled upon the table. There was a pitcher of cold cider, some cheeses and a fresh-baked loaf set out for breakfast but Matthias lacked the appetite to do it justice and stared miserably about the room. It was neat and cheerful, which did not reflect the Warrior's mood.

There was a knock on the door.

"Come in, please," he called, straightening up.

The Foremole entered, tipping the top of his black velvet furred head with a huge digging claw. He wrinkled his button nose in a wide smile that almost made his bright tittle eyes vanish.

"Gudd morn to you'm, Mattwise, yurr. Uz motes be diggen a cooker pit r*day. May'aps you'ud loik to 'elp?"

Matthias smiled fondly. He patted his old friend's back, knowing the mole had come to cheer him up.

"Thank you for the offer, Foremole. Unfortunately I have other more serious business to attend this morning. Hmm, that sounds like it in the next room, just getting out of bed. Will you excuse me, my friend?"

"Hurr hurr, ee be a roight laddo, yurr young Mattee. Doant wack 'im too 'ard naow," Foremole chuckled, and left to join his crew.

Matthias had been far too angry to deal with his son on the previous afternoon, so he sent him straight off to bed without tea or supper. Now the Warrior stood facing the bedroom door, watching the tousled head of his son peer furtively around the door jamb.

Seeing his father, he hesitated.

"Come in, son." The Warrior curled a paw at him.

The young mouse entered, gazing hungrily at the laden breakfast table before turning to face his father. Sternness had replaced the previous day's anger on the Warrior's face.

"Well, what have you got to say for yourself, Mattimeo?"

"'m sorry," Mattimeo mumbled.

"I should hope you are."

"'m very sorry," Mattimeo mumbled again.

"Foremole said I should whack you. What do you mink?"

"'m very very sorry, 't won't happen again. Dad."

Matthias shook his head, and placed a paw on his son's shoulder.

"Matti, why do you do these things? You hurt your mother, you hurt me, you hurt all our friends. You even get your own little pals into trouble. Why?"

Mattimeo stood tongue-tied. What did they all want? He had apologized, said he was very sorry, in fact, he would never do it again. Jess Squirrel, his mother, Constance, they had all given him a stern telling-off. Now it was his father's turn. Mattimeo knew that the moment he set paw out of doors he would be spotted, probably by Abbot Mordalfus, and that would mean another stern lecture.

Matthias watched his son carefully. Beneath the sorrowful face and drooping whiskers he could sense a smouldering rebellion, resentment against his elders.

Turning to the wall over the fireplace, Matthias lifted down the great sword from its hangers. This was the symbol of his rank. Warrior of Red wall. It was also the only thing that could command his son's total attention. Matthias held the weapon out.

"Here, Matti, see if you can wield it yet."

The young mouse took the great sword in both paws. Eyes shining, he gazed at the hard black

bound handle with its red pommel stone, the stout crosstree hilt and the magnificent blade. It shone like snowfire, edges sharp and keen as a midwinter blizzard, the tip pointed tike a thistle spike.

Once, twice, he tried to swing it above his head. Both times he faltered, failing because of the sword's weight.

"Nearly, Father, I can nearly swing it."

Matthias took the weapon from his son. With one paw he hefted it, then swung it aloft. Twirling it, whirling it, until the air sang with the thrum of the deadly, wonderful blade. Up, down and around it swung, coming within a hair's-breadth of Mattimeo's head. Turning, Matthias snicked a stalk from an apple, sliced the loaf without touching the table and almost carelessly flicked the rind from the cheese. Finally Matthias gave the sword a powerful twist into the warrior's salute, bringing the blade to rest with its point quivering in the Boor.

Admiration for the Warrior of Redwall danced in his son's eyes. Matthias could not help smiling briefly.

"One day you will be the one who takes my place, son. You will grow big and strong enough to wield the sword, and I will train you to use it like a real warrior. But it is only a sword, Mattimeo. It does not make you a warrior merely because you carry it. Weapons may be carried by creatures who are evil, dishonest, violent or lazy. The true Warrior is good, gentle and honest. His bravery comes from within himself; he learns to conquer his own fears and misdeeds. Do you understand me?"

Mattimeo nodded. Matthias grew stern once more.

"Good, I am glad you do. 1 will not whack you. I have

never laid a paw on you yet and 1 do not intend starting now. However, you attacked little Vitch and you must pay for that, one way or another. At first I thought I should refuse you permission to attend the celebrations. . . ."

Matthias watched the shock and disbelief on his son's face before continuing.

"But I have decided that you may go, providing you run straightaway to the kitchens. There you will ask Friar Hugo to allot you double the tasks he gave to Vitch yesterday. When you have finished working for the Friar, you will offer to help your mother with the gathering of flowers until such time as she decides to free you of your task. Is that clear?"

Mattimeo's face was a picture of disbelief. He, the son of the Redwall Warrior, working! Never before had he been asked, much less ordered, to carry out Abbey tasks. The young mouse considered himself the inheritor of his father's sword and duties. As such, he was firmly convinced that he was above any type of pan-scrubbing or daisy-gathering. Even Constance knew that. She had sentenced Vitch to hard labour, but even she did not dare tell the future Champion to dirty his paws with menial chores. Besides, Vitch would be finished with his tasks by now. He could stand about and gloat at the sight of his enemy ordered to perform double the work and more.

Matthias watched his son's face. Now was the testing time. Would he behave like the spoiled little creature who had been indulged all his life by the Abbey dwellers, or would he show a bit of character?

The young mouse swallowed hard, nodding his head. "Ill do as you have asked. Dad."

Matthias dapped him heartily on the back. "Good mouse. That's the mark of a warrior in training, obedience. Off you go now!"

Morning sunlight stencilled the high window shaped in soft pink relief on the sandstone floor of Great Hall as

Mattimeo passed through on his way to the kitchens. He felt the fur on his shoulders prickle slightly, as if some beast were watching him from behind. Turning slowly, he faced the west wall. No creature was there. The hall was empty, save for the picture of Martin the Warrior upon the Redwall tapestry. Mattimeo often had this same experience when he was alone and near the large woven cloth. He drew closer, standing in front of the magnificent armoured mouse's likeness. Martin the Warrior looked big and strong. He held the famous sword easily in his right paw, a smile upon his broad honest face, and behind him the images of bygone enemies fled in fear as if trying to escape from the tapestry. The young mouse's eyes glowed in admiration of his hero. He spoke to Martin, not knowing that his father Matthias had done the same thing when he was young.

"I could feel you watching me, Martin. I'm just on my way to do penance in the kitchens, but you probably know that. I didn't mean to disobey my parents or cause them unhappiness. You can understand that, can't you? I had to fight Vitch because he said things about my father. He thought I was scared of him, but I am the son of a warrior and I could not let him insult my family. If my father knew the truth of it all he would not have punished me, but, well, he's my father, you see. I can't explain things properly to him. You're different, Martin. You understand how I feel."

Mattimeo shuffled his paws on the stones beneath Martin's never changing expression.

"You know, sometimes you're just like my father. Look, I'm sorry, I'll try to be a better mouse. I promise not to fight or get into any more trouble or worry my parents again."

He turned and shuffled sulkily toward the kitchens, muttering as he went, "I wish there was another Great War, then I'd show 'em. Huh! They'd be glad of young mice that could fight then. I wouldn't be sent off to scour

pans. They'd probably have to give me a medal or something like that."

Th smile upon the face of the tapestry warrior seemed to be gentler as the immobile eyes watched the small habit-dad figure descend the steps of Cavern Hole.

Friar Hugo was absolute ruler in the vast kitchens of Redwall. He was the fattest mouse in the Abbey and wore a white apron over his habit. Hugo always carried a dockleaf in his tail, which he waved about busily, fanning himself, rubbing it upon a scorched paw, or holding it like a visor across his forehead as he peered down into steaming, bubbly pots. Mattimeo stood by, awaiting orders, whilst Hugo checked his lists, issuing instructions to his staff of helpers.

"Mmmm, let me see, thaf s six large raspberry seedcakes. We need four more. Brother Sedge, quickly, take that pan of cream from the flames before it boils over. You can add the powdered nutmeg and whisk it in well. Sister Agnes, chop those young onions and add the herbs to the woodland stew. Er, what's this? Ten flagons of cold strawberry cordial. That'll never do, we need twice that many. Here, young Matti, nip down to the cellars and fill more flagons from the barrels. Ambrose Spike's down there, so you won't need the keys."

Though the cooking smells were extra delicious, Mattimeo was glad to be out of the steamy

heat and bustle of the kitchen for a while. He saluted the Friar smartly and ran off, dodging mice, hedgehogs, voles and squirrels, all carrying trays, pots, platters and bowls.

The Abbey cellars were peacefully dim and cool. Unwittingly Mattimeo surprised old Ambrose Spike. The cellar keeper was pouring a bowl of October ale, blowing the froth from the top before he drank. As he dipped his snout, Mattimeo said "'scuse me, please, Friar Hugo said I was t" The ancient hedgehog choked and sneezed, spraying

Mattimeo with ale as he whirled around.

"Pahcoochawww! Don't sneak up on me like that, young Matti. Hold still a moment, will you."

Ambrose drained the bowl. Regaining his composure, he stared at the froth lying in the bottom of his sampling bowl.

"Harr, wunnerful! Though I do say it meself, no creature brews October ale like the Spike family. Now, what can I do for you, mousey?"

"Friar says I've got to fill more flagons of strawberry cordial, sir."

"Oh, right, barrels are through in the next section," Ambrose told him, "the ones marked pink, flagons against the wall as /go in. Careful now, don't disturb the little casks of elderberry and blackcurrant wine or they'll go cloudy."

As Mattimeo wandered into the next section, he was hailed.

"Psst, Matt, ssshhhh, over here!"

It was Tim and Tess and Sam Squirrel. Mattimeo tip-pawed over.

"What are you three doing down here?"

Tess Churchmouse stifled a giggle. "We slipped past Ambrose while he was dozing. Come and have some cold strawberry cordial, if s scrummy."

The trio had prised the bung from a barrel that lay on its side. They used long hollow reeds as drinking straws, dipping them down into the liquid and sucking up the sparkling ice-cold strawberry juice.

Tess gave Mattimeo a straw, and he could not resist joining them.

Cold strawberry cordial becomes sickly when drunk too freely. Matt, Tess, Tim and Sam soon found this out, and they lay back awhile and rested. Later, the two church-mice and the young squirrel helped Mattimeo to fill the flagons. Together they bore them up to the kitchens.

Ambrose Spike raised his snout from a bowl of nutbrown beer as they passed through his cellar.

"Mmmm, 's funny, there was only one of 'em here before," he muttered.

Friar Hugo was working flat out now. There was still more than enough to be done before the feast.

"You there, Billum Mole, can you dig me a nice neat tunnel through the middle of that big marrow?"

"Hurt, gaffer, oi serpintly can. Pervidin' oi can eat it as oi goes along."

"Righto, carry on. Oh, there you are, young Matti. Now take your friends along to the larder. I want two small white cheeses flavoured with sage, two large red cheeses with beechnut and rosemary and one of the extra large yellow cheeses with acorn and apple bits. Be very careful how you roll the extra large yellow; don't go knocking any creature down or breaking furniture."

The four chums dashed off whooping, "Hurray, we're going to roll the cheeses!"

Abbot Mordalfus cut a comical sight for so dignified a figure. He was up to his whiskers in fresh cream, candied peel, nuts and wild plums.

Friar Hugo dusted off the Abbot's face with his dockleaf as he passed. "Ha, there you are, Alf. Well, how's the special Redwali Abbof s cake coming along?"

Old Mordalfus chewed thoughtfully on some candied peel. "Very well, thank you, Hugo. Though I still suspect it lacks something. What d'you think?"

Hugo dipped his dockleaf into the mix and tasted it. "Hmmm, see what you mean, Alf. If I were you, I'd put some redcurrant jelly in to make it look more like an Abbot's cake. Doesn't hurt to cheat a little. After all, you're only going by Abbot Saxus's recipe, and that1 s a matter of taste. Yes, put more redcurrant in and we'll name it Redcurrantwall Abbot Alf cake."

The Abbot dusted flour from his paws, smiling proudly. "What a good idea. Hi there, Matthias, where are you off to?"

The Warrior of Redwall was carrying two fishing lines and bait. Dodging a pair of moles who scurried past with a trolleyful of steaming bilberry muffins, he called across, "Don't you remember. Abbot, we were supposed to be going fishing in the Abbey pool for our annual centerpiece?"

Mordalfus dapped a floury paw to his brow. "Goodness me, so we were. I'll be right with you, my son."

Matthias peered about in the activity and bustle. "Friar Hugo, have you seen Mattimeo?"

'Indeed I have, Matthias. The young feller's a great help to me. Haha, I've sent him and his pals to roll cheeses out. That'll keep them busy. Constance Badger is the only one large and strong enough to deal with a big yellow cheese, and I've told them to roll one out, hahaha. I'd love to see how they do that."

Matthias winked at the Friar. "Don't laugh too soon, Hugo. I've got news that'll wipe the smile from your whiskers. Basil Stag Hare has just arrived. I let him in the main gate not a minute ago. He says that he's been on a long patrol over the west plain and hasn't had decent food in three sunrises. Oh, he also said to tell you he's appointed himself official sampler."

Matthias and Abbot Mordalfus left the kitchens with all speed. Friar Hugo was speechless at the news, but only momentarily. His fat little body puffed and swelled with indignation almost to bursting point. As they hurried across Great Hall, Hugo's outraged squeaks followed them.

"What? Never! I'm not having any retired regimental glutton feeding his face in my kitchens. Oh no! Why, the skinny great windbag, he'll eat us out of storeroom and larder before sunset; then, fur forbid, he'll meet up with that Ambrose Spike and start sampling the barrels. We'll have to tell the young ones to cover their ears when those two get to singing their barrack-room ballads and wild woodland ditties. Oh my nerves, I don't think I'll be able to stand it."

Cornflower and Mrs. Churchmouse were carrying a bundle of roses across the Abbey grounds. The blooms ranged from white, right through the shades of yellow, intermixed with lilacs, pinks, carmines and crimsons, to the rich dark purples. Suddenly they were confronted and relieved of their burdens by a lanky old hare whose patchwork-hued fur defied description. His swaying lop ears twitched and bent at the most ridiculous angles as he bowed, making a deep elegant leg to the two mice.

"Allow me, laydeez, wot wot? Two handsome young fillies totin' all this shrubbery, doesn't bear thinkin' about, eh/' he said gallantly. "Basil Stag Hare at y'service, gels. Hmmm, my my, is that cookin' I smell? Ha, old Hugo burnin' somethin' tasty, I'll be bound. I say, d'you mind awfully if I leave you two ravin' beauties to carry all these lovely roses, charmin' picture. Must go now, investigatin', doncha know. See you later, after tiffin, p'raps. Toodle pip now!"

Cornflower and Mrs. Churchmouse collapsed in tucks of laughter as the odd hare shot off in the direction of Friar Hugo's kitchen.

"Oh hahaheeehee! Good old Basil, ohoohoohoo! There'll be fur flying in the kitchens soon. Hahaha-hohoho!" Cornflower gasped.

"Heeheehee! Oh my ribs, did you see the way he dropped the roses when he smelt food. Haha, he's a stomach on four legs, that feller," Mrs, Churchmouse chortled.

Foremole and his crew looked up from the roasting pit they were digging. Wiping paws on fur and blowing soil from their snouts, they chuckled and slapped each other's backs.

I/Hohurr hurr, ee be a champeen scoffer that un, oi never seed narthin so 'ungered atop or below soil. Ee Froiyer'li wack 'im proper wi' ladlespoon on m'ead, you'm see if ee doant, hurrhurr."

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Resounding with the noise of busy creatures and laughter, mixing with the smell of woodsmoke and cooking aromas, the sunlit afternoon stretched into warm windless eventide, turning the red sandstone Abbey walls a rosy hue with the speckle of golden dust motes drifting lazily on the rays of the setting sun.

Slagar sorted the odd jumble of performers' clothing from the bed of the painted cart, throwing appropriate outfits to the chosen actors of his travelling troupe.

"Fleaback, Bageye, Skinpaw, you'll be the tumblers, share that lot out between you."

"But Chief. . . /' Fleaback protested.

"And no complaints, d'you hear!"

"Here, give me those yellow pawsocks, you."

"Huh, you can have 'em, they look daft."

"They're supposed to look daft, thickhead," Slagar explained. "I said no complaints. Come over here, Hairbelly. You'll be the balancer. Try this on. Oh, and don't forget to put the ball sticky side down on your nose, otherwise if 11 fall off. Let's see how you look."

"Arr Chief, I was the balancer last time. Can I do the rope tricks this time?"

"No, you can't. Leave that to Wartdaw, he's best at it."

"Oh, I'm fed up with this already," Hairbelly grumbled. "Look, this tunic doesn't fit me. Besides I can't sing."

Slagar was upon the unlucky weasel, dagger drawn. "You'll sing a pretty tune if I tickle your eyeballs with this blade, bucko. Listen, all of you, one more moan from

anyone and I'll dump the lot of you back out upon the road, where you came from. You can go back to being the starving tramps and beggars you were before I took the trouble to form you into a proper slaving band. Now

is that understood?"

There was a subdued mutter. Slagar dropped the knife and grabbed a sword. "I said, is that understood?"

There was a loud chorus of ayes this time, as the silken hood was beginning to suck in and out rapidly, denoting Slagaˆs mounting temper.

Hairbelly was a little slower than the rest, still unhappy with his role as the balancer.

'If s still not fair though, Chief," he piped up. "You'll probably only be standing about, watching tomorrow night while we do all the work."

Slagar seemed to ignore him for a moment. Turning to the cart, he whipped out a swirling silk cloak. It was decorated with the same design as his headcover, and the lining was black silk, embellished with gold and silver moon and star symbols. Twirling it expertly, he threw it around his body, leaping nimbly on to a row of pews. Then Slagar spread his paws wide in a theatrical gesture.

'1 will be Lunar Stellaris, light and shadow, hither and thither like the night breeze, presiding over all. Lord of Mountebanks, now you see me. . . ."He dropped out of sight behind the pews, calling, "And now you don't!"

The audience strained forward to see where he had hidden himself. Slagar was gone from behind the pews. Suddenly, as if by magic, he reappeared in the midst of his band. Right alongside Hairbelly.

"Haha, Lunar Stellaris, Lord of light and dark. But to those who disobey my word I am Slagar the Cruel, Master of life and death."

Before Hairbelly could blink an eye, Slagar had run him through with his sword. The stricken weasel stared at Slagar in surprise and disbelief, then he looked down at the sword protruding from his middle and staggered as his eyes misted over.

Slagar laughed, an evil, brutal snigger. "Take this fool outside and let him die there. We don't want his blood in here. Now, any one of you scum that wants to join him, just let me know!"

The morning of RedwalTs feasting dawned misty at first light. Abbot Mordalfus and Matthias had fished since the previous afternoon. Having had little luck in daylight, they elected to continue until such time as they made a catch. Tradition dictated that a fish from the Abbey pool must grace the center of the festive board. In bygone years they had been lucky enough to land a grayling, but this year there were few. Out of respect for the graylings, they had let two fine big specimens slip the lines, fishing doggedly throughout the night. In the hour before daybreak they struck a medium-sized carp. It was a fine battle. The small coracle-shaped boat was towed round and round the waters, ploughing through rushes and skidding across shallows. Mordalfus was an experienced fishermouse, and he plied all his skill and guile, remembering the time when he was plain Brother Alf, keeper of the pond. Helped along by Matthias's strong paws, the carp was fought and tackled, diving and tugging, leaping and backing, until it was finally driven into the shallows, blocked on by the boat, and beached on the grassy sward.

Warbeak the Sparra Queen was up early that day. She roused the sparrow tribe who lived in the roof of the Abbey when she spied the activity at the pond.

"Warbeak say Sparras help Matthias and old Abbot-mouse."

Matthias and Mordalfus were glad of the assistance. Tired, wet and hungry, they sat breathing heavily on the bank.

"Warbeak, whew! Thank goodness you've arrived/' Matthias saluted his winged friend and her tribe. "The Abbot and I are completely tuckered out. What d'you think of our fish?"

The fierce little bird spread her wings wide. "Plenty big fishworm, friend Matthias. My warriors take urn to fatmouse Friar; he bum um fish good. Sparra tike fishworm; we eat plenty at big wormtime."

As the Sparra folk towed the carp off in the direction of the kitchens. Abbot Mordalfus turned, smiting, to Matthias.

"Good friends, our sparrow allies, though why everything is worm this or worm that I'll never know. Can you imagine Hugo's face when Warbeak tells him to burn fishworm good?"

Matthias shook pond droplets from his paws. "If s just their way of talking, Abbot. Sometimes I wonder who is the harder to understand, a sparrow or a mole/'

Mordalfus glanced up. The sun was piercing the mists, casting a rosy glow over the world of Mossflower with die promise of a hot midsummer day. From the bell tower the sounds of the Abbey bells pealed merrily away, calling the inhabitants of Redwall to rise and enjoy the day.

Constance the badger ambled down to the pond and beached the coracle with one mighty heave.

"Whoofl If s going to be a real scorcher," she remarked. "My word, tittle Tim and Tess are certainly energetic. Listen to them ringing the Methusaleh and the Matthias bells. Still, we mustn't waste the day, there's so much to do before we can sit down to feast this evening."

Matthias yawned and stretched. "Well, I'm for a swift forty winks and a bath after all that night fishing. IT you realize, the Abbot and I have been stuck in that boat since yesterday noon? Right, Mordalfus?"

Constance held a paw to her muzzle. "Ssshhh, he's fallen fast asleep. Good old Alf."

The Abbot was curled up on the grassy bank, snuffling faintly, still tackling the carp in his dreams.

Matthias smiled, parting his friend gently. "Aye, good old Alf. I remember him taking me on the pond for my first fish. It was a grayling, as I recall. Hmm, I was even

younger than my own son then. Ah well, none of us is getting any younger as the seasons pass."

"Huh, I'm certainly not," the badger snuffled. "Neither is Alf. But I'm not sure about you, Matthias. Sometimes I wonder if you've aged at all. You go off and get your rest now, and I'll see to our angling Abbot here."

Constance quietly scooped the slumbering Mordalfus up on to her broad back and trundled slowly off in the direction of the Abbey dormitories.

On his way over to the gatehouse cottage, Matthias spied Cornflower and Mattimeo carrying flower baskets and pruning knives. He waved to them.

"We landed a beautiful carp. I've got to have a nap and a bath."

Cornflower tied her bonnet strings in a bow. "Oh I'm glad you caught a good fish, dear. I've left your breakfast on the table, we'll see you later, Mattimeo is so kind, guess what? He's promised to help me all day with the flowers."

Matthias winked cheerily at his scowling son. "What a splendid fellow he is. Cornflower. I'll bet it was all his own idea too."

As the morning sun rose higher, Redwall came to life. A team of young hedgehogs and squirrels sang lustily as they carried firewood, damp grass and flat rocks to the baking pit, which the moles were busy putting the final touches to.

"Dig'm sides noice'n square, Jarge. Gaffer, pat yon floor gudd an flattish loik."

"Yurr, you'm 'old your counsel, Loamdog. Oi knows wot oi'm a-doin'."

"Ho urr, be you serpint if n deepwoise enuff?"

"Gurr, goo an arsk Friar to boil your 'ead awhoil, Rooter. Ma/ap ee'U cook summ sense into you'm."

Friar Hugo paced several times around the fish and dabbed at it with his dockleaf.

"Hmm, long time since I baked a carp. Brother Trugg, bring me bay leaves, dill, parsley and flaked chestnuts. Oh, and don't forget the hotroot pepper and cream, lots

of cream."

An otter lingered near the carp, licking her lips at the mention of the sauce ingredients.

"How's about some fresh little watershrimp for a garnish, Friar," she suggested. "Thafd make prime

vitties."

The fat mouse shooed her off with his dockleaf. "Be off with you, Winifred. I've counted every scale on that fish. Er, if you're going for water shrimp, I'll need at least two nets full for a decent garnish."

The bee folk had been extra productive and kind in this Summer of the Golden Plain, and honey was plentiful. It dripped off the symmetrical combs in shining sticky globules. Jess Squirrel and her son Sam were storing it in three flat butts, the dear, the set, and the open-comb type much favoured by squirrels. From the cellars came the slightly off-key sound of singing, a quavering treble from Basil Stag Hare, backed by the gruff bass harmony of Ambrose Spike.

"O if I feel sick or pale.

What makes my old eyes shine?

Some good October ale

And sweet blackcurrant wine.

I'd kill a dragon for half a flagon.

I'd wrestle a stoat to wet my throat.

I'd strangle a snake, all for the sake

Of lovely nutbrown beer. . . .

Nuhuhuhut broooowwwwwnnnnn beeeeheeeyer!"

Upstairs in the vegetable store, Mrs. Lettie Bankvole was remonstrating with her young offspring baby Rolio. He had learned the words after his own fashion and was singing uproariously in a deep rough gurgle,

"I strangle a snake an' wet his throat, I wrestle a dragon an' steal his coat"

"Baby Rollo! Stop that this instant. Cover your ears and help me with this salad."

"I wallop a snake wiv a old rock cake"

"Rollo! Go and play outside and stop listening to those dreadful songs. Strangling dragons and swigging beer -where will it all end?"

Mattimeo was finding out that roses had sharp thorns. For the second time that day he sucked at his paw, nipping out the pointed rose thorn with his teeth. Tim Churchmouse had gone off shrimping with the otters, Tess stayed behind out of pity for the warrior's son.

"Here Matti, you stack those baskets on the cart for your mum. I'll arrange the roses for you. You've got them in a right old mess."

Mattimeo winked gratefully at her. "Thanks, Tess. I'm about as much use as a mole at Hying, with all these flowers. I never thought it would be such hard work."

"Then why did you volunteer for it?"

"I never volunteered," he explained. "Dad said I have to do it as part of my punishment for fighting with Viteh."

Tess stamped her paw. "Oh, that little rat. If s so unfair, it was he who provoked you into that fight. Look, mere he is now, over by the tables, having a sly snigger at you."

Mattimeo saw Vitch, leaning idly on a table. He sneered and pulled tongues in the young mouse's direction.

Mattimeo felt his temper rising. "I'll give him something to stick his tongue out at in a moment," he muttered under his breath. "I'll throttle him so hard if 11 stick out permanently!"

Tess felt sorry for her friend. "Pay no attention to him, Matti. He's only trying to get you into more trouble."

It was difficult for Mattimeo to ignore Vitch. Now the rat was wiggling a paw to his snout end at his enemy.

The young mouse straightened his back from the pile of baskets. "Right, thaf s it! I've taken all I can stand of

his insults."

Quickly less dodged past Mattimeo and ran towards Vitch, who was still grimacing impudently. Angrily the young churchmouse picked up the first thing that came to her paw. It was a pliant rose stem. "Look out, Vitch, there's a great big wasp on your tail," she cried out urgently. "Stay still, I'll get it!"

Startled by Tess's warning cry, Vitch obeyed instantly, turning and bending slightly so she could deal with the offending insect. There was no sign of a wasp behind

Vitch.

Tess swung the rose stem, surprised at her own temper but unable to stop the swishing descent of the whippy branch. It thwacked down hard across Vitch's bottom with stinging speed.

Swish, crack!

"Yeeehooooooowowow!" The rat straightened like a ramrod. Leaping high in the air, he rubbed furiously with both paws at the agonizing sting.

Cornflower came hurrying over. "Oh dear, the poor creature. What happened, Tess?"

The young churchmouse looked the picture of innocence, though she felt far from it. Blushing deeply she stammered an excuse.

"Oh golly. Vitch had a wasp on his bottom, but I couldn't brush it off in time. I think he's been stung."

Vitch was thrashing about on the grass, tears squeezing out onto his cheeks as he rubbed furiously at his

tender rump.

Cornflower was genuinely concerned. "Oh, you poor thing. Don'trubit, you'll make it worse. Go to Sister May at the infirmary and she'll put some herb ointment on it for you. Tess, show him where it is, please."

Scrambling up, Vitch avoided Tess's paw and dashed off, sobbing.

Tess turned to Mattimeo. "Aaahhh, poor Vitch. It must be very uncomfortable," she said, her voice dripping sympathy.

Mattimeo tried hard to keep a straight face. "Indeed it must. If s a terrible thing to be stung on the bottom by a churchmouse, er, wasp, I mean."

Cornflower put her paws about them both. "Yes, of course. Now you two run off and play. There may be other wasps about and I don't want either of you stung."

"Come on, Matti, lef s go water-shrimping with Tim and the otters," Tess suggested.

"Great, I'll race you over there. One, two, three. Go!"

Cornflower shaded her eyes with a paw as she watched them run.

"What a lively young pair," she said aloud.

Mrs. Churchmouse arrived, carrying a pansy and kingcup bouquet. "Yes, but you watch your Matti. He'll let her win. He's very fond of my little Tess."

"Bless them, that's the way it should be." Cornflower nodded, smiling.

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It was late afternoon on the common land at the back of Saint Ninian's. Slager had marshalled his band of slavers. Threeclaws the weasel and Bageye the stoat stayed inside the ruined church, together with the wretched little group of slaves, who had been manacled to a running chain. They were to await the return of Slagar and the others that night.

Now the Sly One reviewed his force. They were dressed as a band of travelling performers. None looked evil, Slagar had seen to that. Every ferret, stoat or weasel had a sifiy grin painted on its face with berry stain and plant dyes, and all wore various types of baggy comical costume. The fox swept up and down the line, adjusting a ruffle here, affixing a false red nose there.

Dressed as the Lord of Mountebanks, Slagar the Cruel looked neither comical nor amusing. There was a mysterious air about him, hooded and caped in swirling patterned silk which showed the black lining of the moon and stars motif at every turn.

"Right, listen carefully. Throw down any weapons you are carrying. Right now!" His voice was a warning growl, flatly dangerous.

There was an uneasy shuffling. The slavers were apprehensive of entering the Abbey without weapons.

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Slagar paced the ranks once more.

"Last chance. When 1 say throw down your weapons, I mean it. Next time I walk around I will search you, and anyone carrying a weapon - anyone, I don't care who -I'll kill that creature with his own armoury. I'll gut him, right here in front of you all. Now, throw down your weapons!"

There was a clatter. Knives, hooks, swords, strangling nooses, daggers and axes fell to the ground like a sudden shower of April rain.

Slagar kicked at a saw-edged spike. "Wartclaw, gather 'em and sling 'em into the church until we get back. The rest of you, form up around the cart, ten in front pulling, the rest at the sides and back shoving. We'll take the path nice and easy now, travel at a steady pace. That'll bring us there in the early evening."

As they trundled along the path, the Sly One said to his minions, "Leave all the talking to me, I know these creatures and I can handle them. Nobody talks, is that clear? I don't want any loose-tongued addlebrain blowing the gaff by mistake. If anyone speaks to you, then pull a silly face, smile and turn a cartwheel. Act the goat. You're supposed to be a travelling entertainment, so look amusing. If they ask us to share their food, which they probably will, then mind your manners and don't go piggin' it down. Take a slice or a portion of whatever and pass the bowl to your neighbor. If there's ladies present, then be polite and offer them the food first, before you start wolfin' it down your famine-fed gobs. Be friendly with the little ones and keep your eyes out for any likely looking youngsters, straight-limbed, sturdy. Don't for the claws' sake recognize Vitch. You've never set eyes on him before. Right, any questions?"

Fleaback held up a paw. "Er, how'll we know when the moment is right, Chief?"

"I'll tell you, dunderhead."

Halftail was a little puzzled. "But how will you know, Slagar?"

The Sly One looked at him pityingly. "Because they'll be asleep, nitbrain."

"How will you know that they're all going to go asleep together at the same time?" Halftail persisted.

Slagar patted his belt pouch. "Don't worry, I'll see to that. Oh, and after we've put on our performance, don't drink anything, whatever you do. When you are sitting at the table you can drink what you like, but not once you've left the table to perform."

"Dun huh huh hu!" Skinpaw laughed oafishly. "Yer goin' to drug 'em, aren't you, Chief?"

Slagar looked down from his perch on the cart. "I'll drug you if you don't shuttup, rurniphead."

Halftail piped up again. "But if we drug 'em all, whaf s to stop us taking over this Redwall place ourselves?"

The Sly One nodded. "I was wondering when somebody was going to ask me that one. Well, I'll tell you. I think the place is bad luck. Others have tried and failed, and I mean real warriors, not like you dithering lot. No, all I want is slaves and revenge. A mere pawful of rabble could never hold a place like that. You'll know what I mean when you see the big badger, or the otters. They really know how to fight. They're not afraid of death if their precious Abbey is threatened."

"And we're going in there unarmed?" Halftail's voice sounded shaky.

"Of course we are, halfwit," the fox said sarcastically. "You can bet they'll search us, and we wouldn't last a second if they found arms on us. That Matthias the Warrior would go at us like a thunderbolt."

"Matthias the Warrior? Is that the badger?" Halftail asked.

"No, he's a mouse."

"Haha, a mouse," Skinpaw sneered.

"Yes, a mouse. But you won't laugh when you see him. That one's a born warrior. He has a sword too, and I think it's magic!"

"A magic sword! Hoho, I might just borrow that for meself," Halftail howled.

"Stop the cart!" Slagar commanded.

Immediately the cart ground to a halt. The silken mask puffed in and out furiously with savage temper.

"Don't dare touch that sword. Its magic is only for the Redwall mice; there's probably a spell on it. It would be the death of us. Stick to the slaving, do you hear me? If 11 be bad enough stealing his son, but if you follow my plan we'll get away with it."

There was an ominous silence. Dust rose off the path where the cart had stopped. The slavers looked doubtfully at one another, the unspoken question hanging like a rock in their mouths.

Steal the son of such a warrior, so that was Slagar's revenge. A fearsome warrior with a magic sword, strong enough to protect a whole abbey.

"Who told you to stop? Come on, stir your stumps and get this cart moving," Slagar told them.

They pushed and pulled with mixed emotions.

"Do as you're told and I'll make you rich," Slagar egged them on with his sly tongue. "You all know me, Slagar the Cruel, the Sly One. Nowhere is there a cleverer slaver than me. I am the Lord of double-dealing, and my plan will easily confound an abbeyful of honest woodlanders. There's not a stoat, weasel, rat, ferret or fox among them; they're too noble for their own good. They'll never find us. I will have my revenge on Redwall and you will all be rich, when we go to sell them where none can follow."

Scringe the ferret asked the question, dreading the answer as the words tumbled out.

"Where'll we sell the slaves, Chief?" He swallowed hard and wished he had not spoken.

"In the Kingdom of MalkarissM!"

A moan of despair arose from the slaving band.

Slagar was talking of the realm of nightmare.

Nadaz, the purple-robed Voice of the Host, led a party of Mack-robed rats up from the depths of the underground construction. The causeway steps wound their way around the sides of the abyss, from the green misted deeps to the broad torchlit ledge. The blackrobes halted, and Nadaz came forward until he stood before the statue of Malkariss. Sometime in the distant past it had been carved from a column of limestone which stood near the brink of the ledge. The thick column was the result of stalagmite meeting stalactite, and it reared from the ledge to connect with the high arched cavern ceiling. It was carved into a monstrous effigy of a white polecat with teeth of rock crystal and eyes of the darkest black jet. The torchlights from a large wheel-shaped chandelier illuminated the terrifying idol. Nadaz bowed his head and began chanting,

"Malkariss, Ruler of the pit, Lord of the deep and dark, I am Nadaz, the Voice of the Host To which your servants hark. Hear me, O Ruler of eternal night, Whose eyes see all we do. King of the void beneath the earth, we bring our pleas to you."

"Speak, Nadaz. Tell me that my Kingdom is ready." Malkariss's voice was a labored hiss which echoed around the rocks as it emanated from between the un-moving crystalline teeth of the statue.

The purple-robed rat stretched his daws in supplication. "Lord Malkariss, the rocks will not haul themselves, nor will they be cut into blocks to be laid one on another. Four more slaves have died of late. We need more workers, strong young woodland creatures who can labor for many seasons."

Nadaz stood awaiting his master's answer, not daring to look up at the awful glittering jet eyes.

"Are there no more new captives lying in my cells?"

"Lord, the cells have stood empty for a long time now."

"What of the longtails at the river; have none passed this way?"

"None, Lord, who dares to climb the high plateau and risk the pine forest."

"Hmmmm. Then you must carry on with what you have and work them harder. Get word to Stonefleck. Tell him to watch for the masked fox. He has been gone two seasons now."

There was a prolonged silence. The torchlights flickered and winked from the flecks of mica and crystal which studded the cavern walls as the blackrobes stood impassively at the head of the steps, waiting upon the Voice of the Host. Finally Nadaz bowed.

"Malkariss, I hear and obey!"

Turning, he swept through the ranks of blackrobes, leading them back down the causeway steps. They were soon lost in the green mist that arose from the depths. From below, there came the sound of chiselling and hammering, the scraping of great stones being dragged and the crack of whips, intermingled with the weak anguished cries of young woodland slaves imprisoned beneath the earth into a life of forced labor.

The statue of the immense white polecat stood alone in the torchlight. A sigh emanated from the mouth.

"Aaaaanhhhh, my kingdom!"

54

At Redwall, sporting events for the youngsters had been going on since early afternoon. Matthias woke refreshed. He sat on the west wall steps with John Churchmouse, Abbot Mordalfus, Basil Stag Hare and old Ambrose Spike. They drank cider and watched the antics of a young mole trying to shin up a greased pole to retrieve the bag of crystallized fruits from its top. The little fellow was over halfway up, further than any had got, and the watchers on the steps yelled encouragement:

"Dig your claws in, Gilly. You'll make it!"

"Take it easy, old lad. A bit at a time, thaf s the way!"

"Stay still! Stay still! Oh he's slipping!"

Gilly slid slowly earthward, his face a picture of longing.

"Gurr, sloidy owd greasepole, ee be loik tryin' r* rassle wi' a damp frog. O shame on oi, ee camdy's still thurr."

They applauded loudly. "Good try, young un, well done!"

Constance the badger came ambling over towards them. As she passed near to the greased pole, young Sam the Squirrel moved like lightning. He dashed a short way, bounded on to Constance's back, sprang up on her head and gave a mighty leap. It carried him over the top

of the greased pole. He snatched the candied fruit bag as he went, without a backward look.

"I say, was that fair?" Constance blinked owlishly.

Gilly and Sam sat laughing on the grass, sharing the fruits between them. The young mole patted Sam with a greasy paw as he stuffed a sugar plum in his mouth.

"Hun hurr, bain't nuthin' in ee rules agin it, no zurr."

"Look out, gangway, here come the runners!"

On the second lap of the Abbey grounds, the runners came by, Tess Churchmouse in front by a whisker and a tail. They sped by, jockeying frantically to be among the front runners on the last lap.

John Churchmouse puffed at his pipe between chuckles. "She's a one for the running, my young Tess is."

Mattimeo came dashing across, wearing a coronet of dripping duckweed on his head.

"Look what the otters gave me, 1 won, I won!" he shouted.

Streamsleek, a powerful young otter, followed in Mattimeo's wake, along with a group of young creatures. The otter slouched down on the steps, shaking water from his coat.

"Crimp me sails, but he did that, Matthias. Three circuits of the pool on a log. I had me course well charted to keep up with him."

The warrior mouse handed Streamsleak the cider flagon and ruffled his son's damp back.

"Well done, Marti. You'd better let that duckweed tiara dry out a bit before you wear it, though."

"Balderdash, spoils of war, wot?" Basil Stag Hare said through a mouthful of summer vegetable pastie. "You wear it, young feller me bucko, 'twas honorably won."

Tim Churchmouse came round from the south side of the Abbey, carrying baby Rollo Bankvole on his back.

"Look, everybody, this ruffian has just beaten me to first place in the sack race."

They laughed aloud as baby Rollo flew a small paper

kite on a string that he had been given as a prize by Cornflower. Basil Stag Hare took the infant upon his knee. He gave him a drink from his cider beaker and a bite of his pastie.

"Right, Rollo you young rip. Let's hear you sing for old Uncle Baz, wot?"

Rollo willingly obliged, piping up in his gruff baby voice,

"Fight a flagon an' drink a dragon, Gizzard a lizard an' split his blizzard, Ride a spider for good ol' cider, Gooooood ooooooold tidenTrrrrr!"

Suddenly Basil deposited the infant on the steps and shot up to the west ramparts. Mrs. Lettie Bankvole was seen bustling across from the gatehouse doorway, where she had been folding napkins for the table.

"Ooh, you villainous lop-eared troublemaker, just let me get my paws on you and I'll make you sing a different tune." Basil stood on a battlement peak, trying to reason with the furious mother of Rollo.

"But madam, I can assure you the little chap composes his own verses. Jolly good too, if you ask me. Top hole."

"How dare you! I'd take a switch to you if I were your mother."

"Fur forbid, ma'am. If you were my mater I'd chuck meself off the jolly old battlements and save you the trouble."

Mrs. Lettie Bankvole straightened her pinafore frostily. "And don't you sit there grinning, Ambrose Spike, you're as much to blame as that excuse for a rabbit up there. Come here, baby Rollo, this instant!"

The outraged mother swept her offspring up and hurried away, chiding him as she went.

"Now don't ever let me hear you singing that dreadful song again. Say you're sorry for upsetting Mama."

Baby Rollo thought about this for a moment, then broke out into song lustily.

"I'd roll a mole an' squeeze a sparrow.

Or shoot a rat wiv a big sharp arrow,

For good oT Wa-ha-ha-hack currant wiiiiiiine!"

Basil descended the stairs, muttering to himself, "Inventive little wretch, must remember that verse, what was it? Strangle a mole with a great big marrow? Talented young blighter, wish we'd had him in the old fifty-seventh foot fighters' mess."

As the bells tolled out, a chorus of mice could be heard singing around the grounds.

'To table, to table and eat what you may. Come brothers, come sisters, come all. Be happy, be joyful, upon our feast day, Eight seasons of peace in Red wall. So sing from dusk to dawn And let the Abbey bells ring. The sun will bring the morn. And still we will merrily sing."

The sweet sounds floated out, fading on the warm evening air, as every woodlander and Redwall creature hastened to take their place at table for the long-awaited feast. Such festivity there never was!

Eight long trestle tables had been laid in a sprawling octagon, covered in the finest white linen, overlaid with pastel-hued mats of woven rushes. Intricate flower arrangements trailed night-scented stock, roses, pansies, kingcups, jasmine, lupins and ferns at the junction of each table. Places were set out and named in neatly printed small scrolls, each of which doubled as a napkin. Bowls of hot scented flower waters steamed fragrantly, awaiting the advent of sticky paws. There was no top table or concession to rank, and the humblest sat alongside the greatest, squirrels rubbed paws with

mice, otters rubbed tails with voles, and moles tried not to rub shoulders with hedgehogs. Everything was perfect, except for the food. . . .

That was beyond mere words.

Salads of twelve different types, ranging from beetroot to radish, right through many varieties of lettuce and including fennel, dandelion, tomato, young onion, carrot, leek, com - every sort of vegetable imaginable, cut, shredded, diced or whole. These were backed up with the cheeses, arranged in wedge patterns of red, yellow and white, studded with nuts, herbs and apple. Loaves were everywhere, small brown cobs with seeds on top, long white batons with glazed crusts, early harvest loaves shaped like comstooks, teabread, nutbread, spicebread and soft flowerbread for infants. The drinks were set out in pitchers and ewers, some in open bowls with floating mint leaves, October ale, fresh milk, blackcurrant wine, strawberry cordial, nutbrown beer, raspberry fizz, elderberry wine, damson juice, herb tea and cold cider.

Then there were the cakes, tarts, jellies and sweets. Raspberry muffins, blueberry scones, redcurrant jelly, Abbofs cake, fruitcake, iced cake, shortbread biscuits, almond wafers, fresh cream, sweet cream, whipped cream, pouring cream, honeyed cream, custardy cream, Mrs. Churchmouse's bell tower pudding, Mrs. Bank-vole's six-layer trifle. Cornflower's gatehouse gateau. Sister Rose's sweetmeadow custard with honeyglazed pears, Brother Rufus's wildgrape woodland pie with quince and hazelnut sauce.

To name but a few. . . .

The rule was to start with what you liked and finish when you felt like. Nothing was stinted

and everyone was to make sure that their neighbors either side of them enjoyed everything.

"Hi, Tess, have some hot candied chestnuts."

"Thank you, Mart. Here, try some of this almond wafer topped with pink cream. I've just invented it and if s lovely."

"Yurr, pass oi that troifle, oi dearly do luv troifle. Hurr, coom on. Abbot zurr, you'm b'aint ayten 'ardly a boit. Let oi 'elp you f summ o' thiz yurr salad 'n'bread'n'-cheese'n bell tower pudden."

"Oh er, all together? Thank you, Foremole, most kind. Have you tried my Redcurrantwall Abbot Alf cake?"

"Strike me sails, Mordalfus, thaf s a nice long name for a good-sized cake," Winifred commented. "Ho, it tastes 'andsome. Pass us the cider, matey."

"My, my, Basil, you're not saying much."

"Mmmfff scrumff grumphhh. Action, laddie buck, that's the ticket. Grmffff, munchmunch, slurrrp!"

'Try some of my woodland pie, Matthias. By the fur, is that Basil behind the huge plateful over there?"

"Thank you, Brother Rufus. A little more nutbrown beer for you? Haha, so it is. Every time his ears show over the top of that pile of food he shoves more on it. Oh dear. I'm sure he'll explode before the evening's out. Hi, Basil, steady on old lad."

"Grmmmfff, munch. Beg pardon, old mouse, can't hear you. Must be me old war wound, snchhh, gulp* Oh no, ifs a stick of celery in me ear. How*d that get there, chompchomp, grumphhhl"

The Abbot was upstanding now. He beat upon the table with a wooden ladle.

"Silence, please. Give order and make way for Friar Hugo and the fish."

The carp was on a low wide trolley. Hugo would allow none to help. Proudly he pulled and tugged until he drew it up to the table. Fanning himself with the tail-held dockleaf, he regained his breath.

"Abbot, the fish prayer, if you please."

The eating stopped. All sat in reverent silence as Mordalfus spread his paws over the carp and intoned:

"Fur and whisker, tooth and daw, All who enter by our door. Nuts and herbs, leaves and fruits,

Berries, tubers, plants and roots. Silver fish whose life we take Only for a meal to make."

There was a loud and heartfelt "Amen" from all.

The Abbot gave the proceedings over to Hugo, and the fat little Friar cleared his throat.

"Ahem, my friends, this year I have created for you a dish known as Carp Capitate. You will observe that I marinated my fish in a mixture of cider and dandelion extract. It has been grilled on a turning spit, skinned and laid in a slow-cooking mixture of cream and mushrooms

with hotroot pepper, then garnished with flaked almond, mint leaves and chopped greens."

"Absolutely spiffin'. I say, Hugo, you old pan-walloper, d'you need a good steady-pawed fellow to help you t' serve the old trout, wot wot?"

Friar Hugo never blinked an eyelid, but there were titters and smothered giggles from every corner at Basil's offer. Hugo addressed the Abbot:

"Lord Abbot, before I serve you the first portion to taste, can I suggest jugged hare for our n xt banquet?"

Basil's ears stood straight up with indi nation. "I say, steady in the ranks there. I wouldn't be a gt;le to have any, doncha know."

Amid gales of unrestrained laughter. Abbot Mordalfus dug his fork into the delicious dish. A whisker's-breadth away from his lips he stopped the loaded fork and said, "Friar Hugo, my most old and valued chef, I pronounce this dish totally excellent merely by the sight and aroma, knowing that when I actually taste it, I will be lost for words."

A cheer went up at the Abbof s gallant pronouncement. Hugo fanned himself furiously with pleasure at the compliment.

Basil Stag Hare actually ate four portions, claiming that he had an otter ancestor somewhere in his family tree.

Then the toasting started, led by Ambrose Spike. "I

would like to toast all Redwall Abbots past, and in particular good old Mordalfus, our present Abbot."

"Yurr yurr, gudd owd M'dalfuzz."

"I would like to toast Matthias the Warrior, our champion," called out Brother Rufus.

"Good egg, I'll second that, old bean."

"I would like to toast our young ones, the hope of future seasons to come."

"Hear, hear. Cornflower. Well toasted."

"Ahem, as a retired regimental buffer, I'd like to toast anything on toast: cheese, mushrooms, what have you. ..."

"Oh, all right, Basil. Here's to tomatoes on toast."

"I toast Mr. Hare and Mr. Spike."

"Sit down, baby Rollo, and drink your milk."

"Here's to the otters and the squirrels."

"Bravo, here's to the sparrows and the moles."

"To Redwall Abbey."

"To Mossflower Woods."

The toasts flew fast and thick. Laughter, song, good food, sufficient drink and friendly company were making it a feast to remember.

Then Slagar the Cruel knocked upon the door of Redwall Abbey.

1O

Slagar turned to the group at the cart. They had been watching him banging fruitlessly upon the main gate.

"They'll never hear you, Chief," Wartdaw ventured. "We'll have to think of some other way to distract them."

Slagar's paw was numb from hitting the woodwork. "We? You mean me, don't you? Here, Skinpaw, sing that song. Halftail, get that little drum from the cart and beat it. Scringe, there's a flute in the cart. See if you can get a nine out of it."

Skinpaw was the only one of the slavers who had actually been in a travelling show. Filling his lungs, he began singing the song of strolling performers, in a cracked voice.

"Lalalalalalala, we travel from afar, Derrydown dill, over vale and hill. We camp beneath the stars. Lalalalalalala, good fortune to you, sir. The strolling players bring to you Magic from everywhere. . . ."

Skinpaw shrugged at Slagar. "Chief, thaf s all I know. I've forgotten the rest."

The Sly One swirled his cloak impatiently. "Then sing it over and over again. You two, try to pick up the tune

on the flute and drum. The rest of you, tumble about in the road and join Skinpaw on the 'La la la' bits."

Slagar kept his eye against a joint that was slightly open in the solid gate timbers.

The entire troupe went through the routine several times. Slagar waved his paw encouragingly at them.

"Keep it up, louder, louder! I can see they've heard us. They're coming across the grounds. Keep it up, keep going."

The hooded fox leapt aboard the cart. Crouching, he covered himself with a pile of old coloured wagon sheeting.

There was a scraping of drawbars and bolts, and the door opened partially as Matthias came out onto the path, followed by Constance the badger and Ambrose Spike. They stood awhile, watching the performers, then Matthias called out. "Hey there. What can we do for you?"

"Send 'em on their way, scruffy bunch of ragbags," Ambrose Spike snorted.

"Ambrose, don't be so ill mannered!" Constance nudged him sharply. "We can at least be civil to travellers. Leave the talking to Matthias and myself."

Slagar bounded up in a whirl of coloured cloth. Leaping over the edge of the cart, he landed on the path, twirling his cape this way and that.

"Happy Midsummer Eve to you, my lords," he said, doing his level best to keep his grating voice light and cheerful. "You see before you a band of strolling entertainers, foolish fellows and peace-loving buffoons. We travel the roads merely to bring you songs, stones, tumbling and leaping, comical antics to amuse you and your families. Where do we come from? No creature knows, except I, Stellar Lunaris, master of the moon and stars."

The fox whirled round and round, showing the fining of his cape, the silk shimmering and twinkling in the hot summer twilight on the dusty roadway.

Constance relaxed slightly. Only a band of travelling players. Her keeii old eyes checked the ditch that ran west of the path for signs of others hidden there. It was clear.

Before he could be stopped, Ambrose Spike called out, "And what will it cost us, this magical entertainment?"

Slagar stopped the cloak revolving and spread his paws. "A crust from your grand table, maybe a drink of cool water and the safety of your Abbey walls so that my friends and I can sleep without fear through the night. Oh, do not worry, good creatures. We will sleep upon the grass out here if you fear us."

Matthias the Warrior of Redwall stepped forward, rubbing his paw across the red pommel stone of the wondrous sword he carried sheathed at his side.

"We fear no creature. Redwall buried its foes many seasons back. Stay here a moment, I would talk with my friends."

The trio drew back into the gateway, where groups of curious revellers had left the table and were peering round the gates. "Well, what d'you think, Warrior?" Constance asked in a low voice. "They look harmless enough to me, even though they are led by a fox."

Matthias pursed his lips. "Hmm, the rest are weasels, stoats and ferrets. Nothing that we can't cope with. They'd be outnumbered at least fifteen to one inside Redwall, and they don't seem to have any hidden army waiting to spring out in ambush on us. I think they look ragged but harmless enough."

Behind them the young ones were eagerly craning their necks, calling out excitedly. "Hurray! Clowns and tumblers. Oh, can we see them, Constance?"

"Look, there's a magic one. Ooh, see his cloak!"

Vitch was leading the youngest in a chant. "We want to see, we want the show . . . !"

Basil Stag Hare pushed his way though to Matthias. He was chuckling indulgently and waving his ears for silence.

"Steady on, chaps, haw haw! A jolly old concert party, wot? Don't be an old stick in the mud, Constance. Let the blighters in, as long as they don't pull rabbits out of hats/'

Constance shook her big striped head from side to side doubtfully. The chanting broke out even louder. Finally she winked at Matthias and nodded to the hooded fox.

"Oh all right! Come on then. You youngsters, move aside and let me open the gates, otherwise these tumblers won't be able to get in."

The young ones gave a great cheer.

Slagar was impressed with the long tunnel of arched sandstone. It denoted the massive thickness of the Abbey walls. The travelling troupe looked around at the great Abbey of Redwall standing in its own grounds, the magnificent alfresco feast lit by the flames from the baking pit. This was a place of riches and plenty.

They were patted down by Abbey dwellers searching for arms. Slagar shook his head sadly. "Alas, these are untrusting times we live in."

Abbot Mordalfus bowed courteously. "Merely a precaution, friend. The feast is far from over yet. Kindly come and sit with us at the table. There is plenty for all."

The silken hood quivered as Slagar wiped away an imaginary tear.

"Such hospitality and kindness. Thank you, sir. My friends and I will repay you by putting on an extra special performance for you and your good creatures."

As they moved over to the table, nobody noticed Vitch slip a small scroll to Slagar. The sly one secreted it beneath his voluminous cape.

Wartclaw crept up behind Skinpaw with a jug of water poised to throw at him. A ferret named Deadnose who stood facing Skinpaw was juggling three balls, unaware that Wartclaw was about to drench Skinpaw with the water.

The youngsters squirmed with glee as they shouted out, "Look out, he's behind you!"

"Who, what did you say?" Skinpaw wrinkled his false red nose and grinned a silly grin.

"Ooooh, look out, he's behind you!"

Deadnose dropped one of the balls he was juggling. Skinpaw bent to pick it up at the exact moment that Wartclaw flung the water from the jug at him. The youngsters roared with laughter as Deadnose was drenched instead of Skinpaw.

Scringe darted in with a large floppy wooden clapper. He swung it and smacked Wartclaw across the bottom with a loud comic slap. Wartclaw whooped with surprise, dropped the jug and stepped in it by accident, getting his paw stuck inside. They ran off with Wartclaw hop-skipping, clumpetty thump, the jug fixed on his paw, while Scringe followed up, whacking his bottom with the clapper.

All the inhabitants of Redwall laughed merrily. Abbot Mordalfus held his sides as he chuckled to Basil, "Ohohoho, I knew that juggler would get drenched, hahaha. Oh, look, the red-nosed fellow is eating one of the juggling balls, hee hee hee. It was an apple all the time, ohahaha!"

"Hawhawhaw. Silly old blighter. I say, the weasel chappie's trying to eat the other juggling balls. Oooh-oohoo, they're real wooden ones! Spit 'em out, old lad, y*ll break your teeth."

Slagar was prancing about the tabletops, giving out paper butterflies to the young ones, they flew just like real butterflies. Nobody noticed that every time he passed a jug, flagon or bowl a little powder was dropped into the drink.

Skirting the back of the gathering, Slagar stood behind the flames of the baking pit and threw a pawful of powder into the fire. It caused a whoosh of green flame to shoot upward. Leaping across the pit, the sly one seemed to materialize out of the middle of the emerald-coloured flames.

"Stellar Lunaris, Lunar Stellaris! I am the Lord of Mountebanks. Is there one among you named Ambrose Spike?"

"Aye, that's me over here. But how did you know my name?"

"The Lord of moon and stars knows all, Ambrose Spike. You are the keeper of the cellars, and your October ale next season will be even better than before."

"Well I'm blowed, the jolly old firejumper knows about you. Spike me lad."

Slagar whirled round. "Is that Basil Stag Hare I hear speaking, famed scout and retired foot fighter?"

"Aye, and famous glutton and singer of dreadful songs."

The Sly One cocked an ear. "Hark! Is that the voice of Mrs. Lettie Bankvole, mother of baby Rollo?"

Mrs. Bankvole was flabbergasted. "Oh haha, yes, that's me. But how did you know, Mr. Stellaris?"

"Gather round, gather round, good creatures of Red-wall Abbey. I will tell you of secrets known only to the Lord of Mountebanks. But first you must drink a toast to the two who caught the big carp, your Abbot and your Warrior, two of the noblest, most brave creatures that ever lived."

Fleaback, Skinpaw, Wartdaw, Scringe and the rest dashed around the tables, chuckling heartily and tickling little ones behind the ears while filling up every beaker and bowl.

Foremole stood up on a bench. "Yurr's to Mattwise ee Wurrier, an' yurr's to Habbot 'Dalfuzz. Gudd 'elth, gennelbeasts."

Beakers and bowls clinked together as the toast was drunk.

Slagar threw another pawful of dust into the fire. This time it rose up golden and smoking in a column as he called out in an eerie voice:

"Stellar Lunaris Fortuna Mandala, hark to me, all creatures."

Mattimeo was fascinated by the magic fox. He put his cider down and watched with rapt attention. Now the fox had taken off his flowing silken cloak. He held it up and swirled it in front of him, slowly at first then getting faster and faster, chanting as he did:

"See the stars, see the moon. Penned around by blackest night. See the diamonds red and purple, Silk and fire and blood and light. See them turning, ever turning. Like a great mandala wheel. Spinning as the fire is burning. What is false and what is real . . . T'

From somewhere near, Mattimeo could hear Mrs. Churchmouse gently snoring. He tried to fix his eyes on the swirling cloak as it turned from diamond patterns to star-studded night skies. The fox's voice droned on and on, until finally Mattimeo could no longer keep his leaden eyelids from drooping.

He fell asleep across the table full of good food, well entertained and completely happy.

11

The day dawned humid and grey. Soon huge dark cloud masses bunched in a lowering sky, occasionally cut through by forked lightning flashes over to the west. Thunder rumbled dully from the far horizons of the Golden Plain, then drops of rain, each one as big as a beechnut, began falling.

Constance the badger was wakened by the wetness, combined with the scream of distress from baby Rollo.

"Mama!"

All around the badger. Red wall creatures were wakening, groaning and stumbling about in the heavy downpour.

Matthias held his throbbing head with one paw as he shook Constance. "Quickly, let's get them all in out of the rain. Was that somebody shouting a moment ago?"

"Mama, Mama, wake up!"

Constance came fully awake as thunder boomed out overhead and the scene was lit by a branch of forked lightning.

"If s baby Rollo over by the north wallgate!"

Hurrying through the battering thunderstorm, Constance and Matthias dashed to where the little bankvole sat crying by the small gate low in the sandstone wall. He was shaking the still form of Mrs. Lettie Bankvole.

"Mama, oh Mama, please wake up, I'm getting wet!"

The warrior mouse's head began to clear with the rain. "Cornflower, over here! Take mis little one inside. We must find out whafs been going on here."

Cornflower scurried off, carrying baby Rollo in her paws as she shielded him from the wet with her body.

"There, there, little Rollo, you come with me. Matthias and Constance will see to your mama."

Basil Stag Hare dashed to join them, a skinny bedraggled figure in the rain. "Oh, me poor old head. Hello, whafs up, you two?"

Constance sat by the pitiful bundle on the grass, wiping rainwater from her eyes. "She's dead! Matthias, who could have done this?"

Matthias had his forehead flat against the wall. Rain mingled with the tears that filled his eyes.

"Who else but that rotten fox and his venomous gang. I was taken in, fooled! Oh, the filthy cowards! How could they murder a helpless creature like Mrs. Bankvole?"

From behind the open walldoor there came a faint moan. Matthias straightened up quickly and rushed towards the door as it swung back. John Churchmouse staggered out from behind the door, blood flowing from his temple where an ugly cut ran a jagged line from ear to ear. Matthias caught him, holding him up against the wall in the pouring rain.

"John, are you all right? What happened?"

The churchmouse wiped rainwater and blood from his eyes. He was obviously in deep shock, reliving the horrific events that he had witnessed.

"Stop . . . stop them ... Get back, Mrs. Bankvole. . . . No, no! Come on, Hugo. . . . Got to stop them. . . . Blood . . . can't see. . . . Where's Hugo, where's Hugo ...T

He collapsed senseless against Matthias.

Constance stepped in, sweeping the unconscious churchmouse up with a single paw. "I'll get John inside.

Winifred, cover Mrs. Bankvote with a tablecloth for the moment. Matthias/ Basil, see if you can find Friar Hugo!" The big badger hurried off through the curtain of rain with her burden.

The warrior mouse and the hare searched frantically around the grounds in the increasing downpour.

"Friar Hugo, where are you?"

"Hugo, come on, old lad. Call out if you can hear us!"

Winifred the Otter bumped into Matthias as he rounded the bell tower. "No sign of Hugo?" she

asked.

"None at all, Winifred. He must have followed them out of the grounds. Hi, Basil! Come on, lef s search the woodland outside the gate."

The rain made loud splattering noises as it burst upon the tree canopy. Visibility was bad with rising mist in the woods.

Matthias searched in the loam, beneath bushes, behind trees and among ferns. Nearby he could hear Basil muttering through the deluge, "Come on, Hugo, you old pan-walloper, show /self. I promise I'll never raid your kitchens again, cross m" heart and hope to starve."

Winifred the Otter shook water from her sleek coat as she bobbed up and down, hoping to catch a glimpse of Hugo in the distance. She checked with Matthias.

"I don't think a fat little mouse like Hugo could have travelled further than this. Perhaps we'd better make our way back to the Abbey and search the grounds more thoroughly," she suggested.

Suddenly Matthias went rigid. "Listen, can you hear something, Winifred?"

A muffled noise came to them through the rain. The otter pointed. "Over there. Quick!"

They crashed though the undergrowth to the place where the sound came from.

It was Basil Stag Hare. He was crouching on the wet ground, hugging something to him and sobbing brokenly.

Matthias felt a huge lump like a lead weight in his chest as he knelt beside the hare. Winifred turned away, unable to look. The fat little Redwall cook lay limp and dead, unaware of the rain that beat down upon the favourite dockleaf his tail still held in its curl. Tears coursed openly down Basil's cheeks as he hugged the still form.

"Hugo old lad, what did they do to you?"

Winifred knelt with her friends. Silently she began brushing the loam and soil rrom the sodden habit and once spotless white apron of the beloved little Friar, then without warning she broke down and began weeping like a baby.

"He never did harm to a living creature. Why this. . . . Why?"

Basil stood slowly, his legs shaking as he held Hugo in his paws. "Permission to carry my old friend back to his Abbey?"

Matthias remained kneeling on the ground, his fur saturated by the ceaseless rain.

"Permission granted, Basil. Winifred, will you tell them I'll be a little late back to Great Hall." The Warrior's voice trembled as he spoke.

As Matthias watched his friends depart, he picked up the dockleaf that had fallen from Friar Hugo's lifeless tail and pressed it to his lips in silent remembrance of his friend.

Inside the Great Hall of the Abbey a large brazier had been set up and lit. Steam rose from the fur of all the creatures as they rubbed themselves off on rough towels. Sister May from the infirmary moved among them, giving out doses of herbal medicine. Many sat on the stone Boor, clutching their heads tightly to relieve splitting headaches. Matthias strode in, followed by Basil Stag Hare. He clattered his swordblade against a sandstone column to gain attention. "Abbot, Constance, Winifred, Jess Squirrel, Warbeak

Sparra, Foremole and you, Basil, follow me down to Cavern Hole. The rest of you, stay inside, keep diy and warm, and look after those who are not well."

A semblance of order was restored in Great Hall. Hot soup was being made in the kitchen, warm blankets-were distributed by Brother Rufus and Sister Agnes, Sister May and Mrs. Churchmouse tended John Church-mouse in the infirmary, while Cornflower took charge of baby Rollo.

Down the steps in Cavern Hole, Matthias sat at the big table with the others. He looked around.

"Well, did any creature see what went on last night? Can anyone shed any light on this terrible thing? 1 want straight answers, no guesses, please."

There was silence, then the Abbot said, "We will have to wait until John Churchmouse is recovered sufficiently to talk. The only other two witnesses to what went on are no longer with us."

There was a stunned silence as the enormity of events sat like a heavy stone upon the little group.

Jess Squirrel stood up slowly. "I'll go to the infirmary and see how Mr. Churchmouse is faring."

Basil livened up. 'Thaf s the ticket, Jess. Action, thafs what we need. Now, where do we start?"

The Abbot folded his paws into his wide sleeves. "At the beginning, Basil. I think we all know who did this shocking thing."

"Harr, boi 'okey we do, zurr,' Foremole growled. " Twas they rascally durtbags, foxes an' the loik, they'm magicked us f sleepen."

"Magicked my auntie's tail," Winifred the Otter snorted. "That was a powerful sleeping draught. We should've known not to trust a fox, should never have let 'em in."

Matthias banged the tabletop hard. "Enough! No accusations or blame-laying, please. Now,

you say that we were drugged by a sleeping draught, well, that

makes sense. I remember the fox asking us to drink a toast. He coutd have slipped herbs or powders into the drinks any time at all while we were watching the entertainment."

Ambrose Spike had walked in. His stickles rose stiffly. "Aye, that's what he did, the scummy toad. Then he started twirlin' that cloak thing of his round and round. I couldn't keep me old eyes open."

There were murmurs of agreement.

"Me too, if s the last thing I remember."

"Aye, we were mesmerized, I tell you."

"Lunar Stellaris my back paw, colossal cheek more like it, wot?"

Foremole's ground logic took over. "Hurr, but wot worr ee arfter?"

"That's the question." Matthias sighed heavily. "We don't keep treasure or precious things that could be looted. There's only the sword and our great tapestry. I have the sword and I know our tapestry soil hangs in Great Hall, I've seen it with my own eyes this very morning. So what was he after?"

Warbeak the Sparra Queen shook a wing. "They um worms, must come from the northlands. All bad in north. They go back that way, open little wormgate in north wall."

Basil seconded Warbeak. "V y1 know, I believe you're right, old thing. When the bally rain stops chuckin' down I'll try and track 'em. Huh, 'fraid there won't be much to track after this

downpour, though."

"I think the Brothers and Sisters should take stock of everything, just in case there is something missing," the Abbot suggested. "Foremole, would you get a burial detail of your moles to dig two graves next to each other? Basil, perhaps you could see what you can find around that small north wallgate. The rest of you, when the rain stops, please help to bring the tables and stuff back in. We'd best get the Abbey back to normal running as soon as possible."

Matthias stood up resolutely. "Right, thaf s it then. I think I'll take a walk up to the infirmary and see how John is."

Sister May and Mrs. Churchmouse cautioned Matthias to be silent as he entered the sick bay. John Church-mouse lay pale and still but breathing evenly.

"How is he?" Matthias whispered.

Mrs. Churchmouse smiled. "Alive and recovering, thank you, Matthias."

John opened his eyes slowly and looked around. Matthias pressed his head back to the pillow as he tried to rise. 'Take it easy, old friend, just lie there. But if you feel like talking, perhaps you could tell us what you remember of last night. Nobody knows what went on at the feast"

Tears beaded in John's eyes. "Friar Hugo and I had full cups already, so we didn't let them pour us more ale. Poor Mrs. Bankvole was too busy looking after her baby to join in the toast. Matthias, there's no doubt about it, you were all drugged, even then Hugo and I were half hypnotized by that fox with the cape. When we saw what was going on we ran after them and tried to stop it, all three of us, the Friar, Mrs. Bankvole and myself."

"But what did go on, what were they after, John?" Matthias had an awful feeling in the pit of his stomach as he asked the question.

The Churchmouse broke down sobbing. "Our young ones, Matthias. They took my Tim and Tess, Sam Squirrel, Cynthia Bankvole and your Mattimeo!"

An icy claw gripped Matthias's heart. The words echoed from the doorway where Cornflower stood with baby Rollo.

"Mattimeo gone, impossible! I'm sure I saw him with the others out there in the rain. Wasn't he with you. Matthias? Tim and Tess, he was with Tim and Tess, yes, thaf s it!"

"My Tim and Tess! Oh, you saw them!" Mrs. Church-76

mouse's voice was tinged with hope. Matthias slammed his paw against the wall, anger and frustration etched upon his face.

"We were still half drugged, the rain was sheeting down, you could not have seen them. You must believe what John says: he saw them being taken. What fools we were not to realize it before now!"

Cornflower was still shaking her head, refusing to accept the fact. "Jess, they'll be with Jess downstairs, all wrapped in blankets and drinking hot soup, you'll see."

"Cornflower, stop! They're gone, believe me. But by my sword Til bring them back, I swear it!"

Baby Rollo was hidden by the aprons of Cornflower and Mrs. Churchmouse as they hugged each other and wept. John raised his head.

"Little Cynthia Vole and Sam Squirrel too, they took them all," he said sadly.

Sister May began bathing John's wound. She dabbed away the tears that fell upon his brow.

"Poor Jess, whatever will we tell her? Dearie me, little Cynthia is an orphan. Bless the mite,

what will become of her? What a cruel and heartless thing to do. Those wicked beasts, stealing our young ones away. What badness!"

Matthias put his paw about Cornflower's shaking shoulders. He was numbed. Thoughts of his son raced through his mind; the stern lecture he had given him, the double tasks. Now he was gone. It was as if half of his heart had gone too. He loved Mattimeo, who would do Kttle things that reminded him so much of himself and Cornflower. Poor Cornflower. Even now she was trying to be brave, comforting Mrs. Churchmouse.

Matthias held her tighter. "Don't worry, Cornflower, I'll bring our son back. I'll bring them all back. Nothing can stop me doing that. He'll be back in his own bed in the gatehouse cottage soon, you'll see."

Mrs. Churchmouse went to tend John and Sister May slipped off to break the sad news to jess Squirrel.

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Cornflower took Rollo over to the infirmary window. She stared out at the rain.

"I won't be going back to our gatehouse until Mattimeo is back," she declared. "I'll stay at the Abbey and mind Rollo."

Matthias nodded silently as Cornflower dried her eyes and sighed, "Oh Mattimeo, I hope no harm comes to you, my son. Poor Mattimeo."

Baby Rollo spread his paws wide, his face as sad as Cornflower's. "Pore 'timeo gone'd. Aaaahhhhh!"

Matthias joined them at the window, staring out into the rain. Sorrow and pain mingled with the cold lights of rage and vengeance in his eyes.

Mattimeo did not know at first whether he was awake or dreaming. The tip of his ear itched initatingly, but it was as if there were leaden weights on his limbs. He could only raise his paw halfway, then the other paw would start to come upward as if pulled like a puppet on a string. From far away he heard unpleasant sniggering and a loud swishing noise.

Crack'.

The young mouse arched his back in agony as a searing pain lanced across him. His eyes opened with shock. He saw Vitch swinging a long thin willow cane. The second blow caught him low across the flanks. Stung by pain and rage, Mattimeo tried to leap up and teach the little rat a good lesson, but he stumbled, falling backwards with manacles clanking around him.

He was chained!

Vitch laughed nastily and raised the whipping cane slowly. "Come on, spoilt baby, little Abbey pet, what are you going to do now, eh?"

Again and again the cane rose and fell, striking the young prisoner indiscriminately. In his excitement Vitch was jumping about as he wielded the thin willow.

"Haha, there's no silly badger to stop me now, is there? I won't have to scrub floors and dean saucepans now.

Take that and that and th"

He danced in too dose. Under the stinging rain ot blows, Mattimeo saw Vitch's paw step within his reach. Crossing both paws tightly, the young mouse tugged hard, bringing the little rat crashing down. Mattimeo bit, butted and belabored away at his tormentor with the slack of the chain.

"Help, help! Murder! He's killing me!" Vttch screamed in panic.

Threedaws the weasel hauled them roughly apart. He kicked Mattimeo down and flung Vitch against the far wall.

"Hell's teeth! Stop screeechin' and shoutin', will you? Whaf s going on here?"

Vitch was quivering with indignation. "You stop shoving me about, Threedaws. Slagar said I could take my revenge on that one when we had him chained up."

-The weasel looked at him disgustedly. "Huh, you weren't makin' a very good job of it, were you? From what I saw, mis mouse was givin' you a good hidin'."

Vitch dashed forward swinging the cane. "I'll teach him a lesson he won't forget this time!"

Threedaws caught the cane and pulled it from Vitch's grasp, then grabbed the struggling rat firmly by the neckfur,

"No you won't, snotnose. I'm in charge while Slagar's not here. There's to be no noise, see. We don't want any creature who's out searching to hear anything. Now you just behave yourself, or I'll lay this cane across your back, rat."

Vitch slumped against the windowsill, snivelling, but he obeyed the weasel's order.

Mattimeo looked about. There were others chained up around the walls: mice, squirrels, hedgehogs, all of them young creatures. He saw Tim and Tess and Sam Squirrel chained against the far wail. Fetters clanking, he waved to them.

"Sam, Tim, Tess, how did we get here?" he asked.

"Silence there!"

Halftail the stoat shouted, and pointed a dagger warningly at Mattimeo. "Shuttup, mouse. You've been told once. Save your breath, you're going to need it for marching."

When Halftail moved out of earshot, a young badger chained next to Mattimeo whispered, "That's Halftail. Watch him, he's a cruel one. My name is Auma from the west plains. What's yours?"

"Mattimeo, son of Matthias the Redwall Warrior."

"Oh, so you're the one that Slagar was after."

"Slagar?"

"Yes, the Sly One, the hooded fox," Auma explained. "This lot are a band of slave traders. Though where they're taking us I don't know."

"Ooh, where am I? Take these chains off me. Boo-hoohoo, I want to go home, boohoohoo!"

It was Cynthia Bankvole. She had just awakened, chained to the other side of Auma.

Threedaws came hurrying over. He thrust his villainous face right up against Cynthia's tearful whiskers.

"One more peep out of you, missie, and I'll really give you something to cry about. Now cut out the whimpering."

Cynthia was struck dumb with terror.

Slagar came bounding in through the broken south window, the silken hood plastered wetiy against his muzzle. He shook himself vigorously, showering rainwater about him.

"By the claw, if s bouncing down in torrents out there. Still, all the better for us. If we get going fast then there'll be no tracks to cover. They won't know which direction we've taken. On the other side of the leaf, that lot at Redwall will have been wakened by this downpour, so we can't afford to hang around. The false trail to the north should keep them busy for a while. Deadnose and

Fengal have taken the cart up that way, then they'll circle around and meet us in the forest south of here."

Bageye lounged in a pew. "What if they don't, Chief? Suppose they miss us? That wood out there is a big place, /know."

The face beneath the hood seemed to grin. "Well, hard luck on them. If II mean bigger shares for all of us."

Bageye had to think about it for a moment, then he gave a slow smile.

"Oh aye, huh huh, so it will."

A long running chain was brought out, and the prisoners were made to stand as it was run through their manacled front paws and locked at either end. Mattimeo found himself standing between Auma and Tess; Tim and Sam were behind them. Slagar paced the line, checking links and shoving the captives into place. Satisfied that everything was in order, he pulled forth a strange-looking weapon and began twirling it about. It was a short wooden handle, from which ran three braided leather thongs, and at the end of each thong hung a round metal ball. They whirled and clacked sharply as he manoeuvred them expertly.

"I am Slagar the Cruel. You are my slaves now." The silk sucked against his face as he spoke. "When I say walk, you walk. If I say run, you run. If I decide you may live, then you will live. If I take it into my head that you may not live, then I will see to it that you die. If ever you should get the chance to escape or make a run for it, my little toy here will bring you back."

The fox swung the weapon and hurled it. Flailing viciously, it wrapped itself around an oak upright at the end of some pews. The three metal balls slammed hard into the timber, snapping it off like a dead twig.

As Fleaback retrieved the weapon, Slagar shrugged carelessly at the captives.

'If you had any back legs left at all after my little toy hit you, I'd have to dump you in the nearest ditch because a

slave that is crippled for life isn't much use to anyone." Mattimeo swallowed hard. The cruel one clearly meant every word he said.

Slagar turned to his aides. "Threeclaws, Halftail, we strike south. Keep 'em moving fast. I want a day and a nighf s forced march to put as much distance as we can between us and RedwaU. Wartclaw, Tornear, bring up the rear. If it stops raining, then cover our trail. Use your canes if they start hanging back or turning the waterworks on. Right, quick march!"

The door was pushed aside as the straggling column made its way out into the torrents of rain that shook the leaves of every tree in Mossflower Woods.

It was early evening and the rain hammered down relentlessly. Abbot Mordalfus stood with Sister Agnes on the site of the feast. The roasting pit was a mass of soggy black embers. Mordalfus threw a scrap of parchment into it.

"This was how the fox knew all about us," he explained. "It was Little Vitch who wrote all the information about us. We gave him a home and he was a spy in our midst. John Churchmouse saw him running with those ruffians when they fled."

Sister Agnes's whiskers shook with indignation. "The little hooligan! To think that we took him in, sheltered and fed him, and thaf s how he repaid us, by spying and noting it all down for the fox. Young Mattimeo should have given him a bit more of what he gave him in the orchard, Father Abbot, that's what I say."

"I agree with you, Sister," the old mouse sighed. "Sometimes violence can be fair when it is used as a chastisement against badness. Is that Brother Sedge waving to us from the Abbey? Come, sister, there may be some news for us."

As they walked over to Great Hall the Matthias and Methuselah bells rang out. They were out of sequence and not tolled with their usual vigour. Agnes pointed to

the bell tower.

"That will be Cornflower, teaching baby Rollo to make our bells speak. How good of her, she's keeping little Rollo's mind off his mother. He still doesn't know she's dead."

Sister Agnes wiped a tear away with her habit sleeve.

In Great Hall Matthias was drying himself off, in company with Basil Stag Hare, Warbeak and several of her sparrow scouts.

The Abbot shook a stern paw at them. "Where did you go off to without as much as a word to me?"

Matthias tossed the towel aside wearily. "We've been up the north road. Warbeak and her sparrows flew ahead of us. But the rain was too heavy, so there are no tracks."

Basil blew droplets of rain from his whiskers. "Tchah! Bally old rain. They've either travelled up that road a lot faster than we thought they could, or else cut off east into the woodlands or west out onto the plains. Couldn't make out a confounded thing with the old skyjuice pouring down like that."

Warbeak fluttered her wings irritably. "They worms, no can travel faster'n us with cart to pull. We catchem, you see."

Abbot Mordalfus gathered up the wet towels. "So, they could have travelled anywhere in three directions from the road. One thing is certain, no creature can track them in this rain, so what can we do?"

Thunder rumbled outside, a vivid lightning flash streaked across the windows of Great Hall. Basil twitched his ears miserably.

"No signs of this little lot lettin' up, old sport," he said to Matthias. "We're really at sixes and sevens, laddie. Can't sit around and twiddle our paws and can't get out and track'em."

Matthias wiped his sword dry, gritting his teeth angrily. "Track them or not, we can't let them get away with our young ones."

The Abbot folded both paws into his wide habit sleeves. "We'll bury our dead and think hard while we're doing it."

Ambrose Spike and Cornflower kept baby Rollo at their side as they tolled the bells that evening. The sky was leaden purple-grey, and rain poured ceaselessly as the procession of Redwallers marched solemnly to the burying place. Dressed in his ceremonial robe, the Abbot stood over the twin graves, at the foot of which two weeping willow saplings had been transplanted.

Tearfully the woodlanders passed in single file, each leaving a small memento to their fallen friends, a young mousemother and a fat little Friar. Some brought flowers, others carried offerings of fruit and nuts, or a treasured object they thought might please, a paw-worked purse, a carved wooden ladle, a dockleaf made from green felt.

Matthias stood alongside Mordaifus, dressed in his full armour, bearing the sword. Together the warrior and the patriarch intoned the prayer for those who would rest forever in the

Abbey grounds.

"Suns that set as seasons turn. Flowers grow and wither yet. Who can say what flame may burn, Friends that we have known and met. Look into the young ones' eyes. See the winter turn to spring, Across the quiet eternal lake, Ripples spreading in a ring."

The rain continued unabated as they filed back to the Abbey, leaving Foremole and his crew to replace the earth gently over their fallen companions.

Supper was served in Cavern Hole. Many had no appetite for food, Matthias least of all, yet he forced himself to eat his fill. So did Cornflower, as she fought

back tears for her son and tried gallantly to cope with baby Rollo.

"Eat up, come on, all of you!" the warrior mouse urged his companions in a tight voice. "There's nothing to be done except eat and store energy. Night has fallen and soon we must rest. But first thing tomorrow I will choose a rescue party. Rain or no rain, we strike norm again. I will make that masked fox wish that he had never arrived at our gates, and we will bring our young ones back home to Redwall where they belong."

Rain slashed down through the bushes and trees, drenching slaves and slavers alike. Tess Churchmouse stumbled against Mattimeo and fell heavily into the chumed-up mud, causing the line of chained prisoners to come to a bumping, clanking halt.

Halftail scurried up, swinging his cane. "Gernip! Up on your paws, you tittle backslider."

Mattimeo threw himself forward, catching the stinging blow that was aimed at Tess. Auma lent a paw to help the churchmouse.

"Up you come, quick, back into line and keep going. If s the only way to stay out of trouble," the badger advised her.

Between them, Mattimeo and Auma hauled Tess upright and shunted her forward.

"Thanks for your help, friend," Mattimeo said.

The young badger shook rain from her striped muzzle. "Listen, I'll give you a tip to pass on to the others. Don't let the running line drag. Hold it in your paws like this, not too tight, and give yourself enough slack to move easily. That way you won't be tripping up so often."

Mattimeo gratefully passed the information to his friends. It worked well. However, Mattimeo was growing impatient with Cynthia Bankvole. She was constantly weeping, stumbling and dragging at the fetters. "Why am I being kept prisoner and made to march through the rain and the wet like this?" she wailed piteously. "I've

never harmed any creature. Look, my habit's all muddy and soggy. Oh, why don't they let us sleep? I'm so tired!"

Mattimeo could stand it no longer. "Oh, stop snivelling and whining, Cynthia!" he snarled angrily. "You've dene nothing but moan and cry since you woke today."

Tess Churchmouse interrupted his ill-tempered tirade. "Mattimeo, don't speak to Cynthia that way! I'm sure your hither wouldn't talk to another creature like mat."

Mattimeo tugged the chain rebelliously. "Well, how am I supposed to talk to her? She's nothing but a whining nuisance. And another thing, why have I got to be like my father all the time?"

"Because you are the son of the Red wall Warrior, weak ones may look to you for defense and protection," Tess replied in a level tone. "Cynthia isn't as strong as you and she doesn't realize the danger we're in. No one has ever treated her in this cruel way before, and to add insult to injury, you start snapping and shouting at her. I know she's only a silly little vole, but that doesn't entitle you to be nasty to her."

Mattimeo was dumbfounded. Tess was right, of course, but she had no reason to start shaming him within hearing of the others. He was about to start a justifying argument when Vitch strolled up, swinging his cane with a malicious grin on his face.

"Come on, you dozy Redwall lot, keep marching. Be strong like Mattimeo. After all, he's the one you can thank for all this. Slagar wouldn't have chanced within a mile of your precious abbey if he hadn't wanted to steal the famous warrior's son. Ha, just think, you'd all be sleeping safe and dry tonight in your dormitories if it weren't for Matt the brat."

Tim Churchmouse ducked under a whippy aspen branch. He caught hold of it, swung it forward and let it go suddenly. It swiped Vitch across the chest, sending him sprawling in the wet grass.

The undersized rat sprang up. "Think you're clever,

don't you?" he said, his voice dripping hatred. "Let me tell you something to cheer you up. Me and Slagar took care of the stupid fat Friar, Mrs. Bankvole too, and that dozy tether of yours. Haha, we did them good and proper, killed'em. You won'tbeseeingthemanymore."

Ignoring his chains, Tim sprang forward, dragging die others with him. He was on top of Vitch, biting through his ear before any creature could stop him.

"You filthy lying little ratscum, I'll kill you!" Tim shouted.

Slagar, Halftail and some others came bounding through the rainy curtain and flung themselves into the fray, laying about viciously with their canes, trying hard to pull the furious Tim oft Vitch. Mattimeo, Sam, Tess and Auma hurled themselves into the melee, kicking and scratching madly. Even Cynthia Vole managed to get a few nips in.

It did not last long. Finally overcome by slavers, the captives were beaten back into line. Slagar blew mud and stormwater through the mouth aperture of his silk mask as he prodded the cane hard against Mattimeo's chest.

"You started this. You're the troublemaker. Well, I'll teach you a lesson you won't forget before you're much older."

Vitch lay in the mud, holding his ear to staunch the flow of blood. He pointed at Tim.

"It was that one, he tried to bite me ear off, I was only walking along mindin' my own busi-"

The masked fox struck the raf s outstretched paw with his cane. "I've told you once before, ratface. Now stop slobbering down there and get up on your paws, or you'll find yourself chained in line with these others."

For long, weary hours the slave line staggered and stumbled through the rain-battered forest. Mattimeo and his friends took turns napping as they marched, each keeping the other moving straight as they snatched a small respite. Brambles tore and tugged at their

saturated habits, which dung tightly about them, making an extra burden to carry. Chain manades rubbed and wore, cutting through fur to sore and chafed limbs. Paws that had been accustomed to soft Abbey sward soon became raw and pierced by thorns, stung by nettles. Caked with mud and drenched in rain, they staggered onward. No one was allowed to walk. The slavers drove them hard and fast, dogtrotting through woodlands and speeding up when passing through open clearings. Slagar was anxious to get as far from Redwall as possible while the rain kept covering their trail.

Dawn broke over the column. Sullen grey-black skies rumbled thunder, occasionally flashing forked lightning and keeping up the remorseless deluge of rain. Slagar shielded his eyes as he looked upward. Truth to tell, he was as weary as his slaves or slavers, having to lead, run up and down the length of the line all night and keep a constant vigil against trouble breaking out. He signalled to Wedgeback.

"We'll rest for a while. String 'em out between that beech and the big oak yonder. Keep them under that low fringe of shrub growing between the trees. Better feed 'em first."

The captives were thrown an assortment of edible roots and plants. Water was everywhere, so there was no need to dish it out. After the lines were wound around the two broad treetrunks the captives were allowed to slump down. Half sheltered from the driving rain, they lay exhausted beneath the low bushes.

Mattimeo was jerked roughly out of his slumber as the chains were loosened.

"Come on, mouse, on yer paws. The Chief wants a word with you."

The young mouse allowed himself to be dragged, half awake and pawsore, by Wedgeback and Threedaws.

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Slagar sat awaiting him in a makeshift den at the base of a big spruce.

"Come in, Mattimeo. You two, get about your business. I have something to tell our little friend which concerns only him and me."

Wedgeback and Threedaws departed. Slagar leaned back, the silken hood quivering and twitching as he watched his captive through the twin eyeslits. "Come and sit here, Mattimeo," he said, his voice sounding almost friendly. "Try to keep your eyes and ears open. I don't want you dropping off to sleep just yet. I'm going to tell you a little true story, so pay attention."

The dusty path outside Redwall Abbey had been churned into mud by constant rain. Gloomy puddles and stretches of water lay in the depressions of the road. Matthias pulled his hood up over his ears and signalled to the party waiting at the threshold of the main gate in the watery dawn light.

"We march north!"

Overhead, the Sparra patrols took off into the driving rain. Matthias, Jess Squirrel and Mrs. Churchmouse headed the march. Mr. Churchmouse was still too unsteady on his paws to be in the vanguard with the others who had lost young ones to the fox.

Basil Stag Hare joined them, still nibbling breakfast from a haversack tied about his narrow chest.

"Reminds me of the great rains ten seasons ago, or was it eleven? Filthy stuff, rain. Isn't much fun to drink, either. Sooner have October ale any day."

Matthias could not resist a smile, despite the seriousness of the mission. "Stop chunnering, you great old feedbag, and get tracking for signs."

"What, er, righto sir. No sooner a word than a sniff, quick's the word, sharp's the action, eyes front and all that."

Progress was painfully slow. The ditch to the west and the ftatland one side of the path had to be searched.

the path itself and the woodland fringe on the opposite side were carefully scrutinized. Whether it was the continuous rain or the oppressive sky Matthias could not tell, but an air of hopelessness seemed to pervade the search.

At midmoming they left the path to shelter beneath some trees on the woodland side, squatting to share bread and cheese, passing a canteen of blackberry cordial from one to another. The atmosphere was decidedly suppressed as they crouched gazing out at the western plain/ the horizon lost in a veil of rainwater, listening to the ceaseless pitter patter of raindrops on woodland leaves. Each creature had his or her own reelings of sorrow, grief, loss, regret, or just puzzlement as to why this sudden misfortune had been visited upon their peaceful Red wall home.

As always, Basil was first to shake tilings up. The gangling hare bobbed back upon the rainy road once more.

"Wallopin' weasels," he cafled. "What's all mis? Layin' about under the trees like a load of saturated stoats, nllin' your faces like a pile of moonstruck moles, squattin' there with your great jaws flappin' like frogs at a flychasin'. Come on, lef s be havin' you! Form up here, chins in, chests out shoulders straight, paws at the correct angle to the fur of the hindlegs. Last one in line's on a fizzer. Jump to attention like this!"

Basil leapt high into the air, landing squarely on splayed hindpaws. No sooner had he hit the path with a squelch man he shot into the air again with his face squinched tight in pain.

"Yowchaballyhoop!"

Quickly Matthias was at his side. "Basil, what is it, are you hurt?"

The hare held up a hindpaw. "Hurt? I'm bally well near speared to death, old lad. Take a gander at me flippin' paw, will you? I've been skewered by a tree trunk."

Matthias inspected Basil's hindpaw. "Hmm, it's a large splinter, quite deep too."

"Ha, splinter?" The retired regimental hare puffed his cheeks out indignantly. "Splinter, y'say. My life, if that's not an enemy spear or at least a rusty dagger stuck in there m' name's not Stag Hare, sir!"

Matthias tried to keep a straight face. "Righto, Basil, hop over onto the grass under the trees here. Jess, lend a paw, will you? You're good at getting splinters, er, tree trunks out. The rest of you, carry on north up the path. We'll catch up with you as soon as we've dealt with our wounded warrior here."

Mrs. Churchmouse hefted a copper ladle she had brought along to deal with the slavers. "Right, form up and follow me. Search both sides of the road and the path as well. See you three later."

Basil shook his head in admiration. "That's the good old style. You give 'em mud and vinegar, marm, just like my old mum used to give me. Yowch! Whatcha doin', Jess? Tryin' to hack me old paw off?"

"Keep quiet, you big baby," the squirrel snorted. "Matthias, hold him still while I dig this splinter out. Hold steady now, I think I've got the end of it."

"Ahoo ahah! Easy there, old tree-walloper. Oohooh!"

"Tree-walloper! I'll give you tree-walloper, you flop-eared foodbin. Be still, here it comes. Aha, gotcha!" Jess drew forth a long sharp wood splinter. "Now suck your pad and spit out awhile, then I'll tie a few dockleaves round it. What d'you make of this, Matthias?"

Matthias peered closely at the splinter. "Blue paint, it's got blue paint on it. I'll bet a bushel of acorns to a cask of ale if s from that cart."

"See the trouble and pain I go to findin' clues for you buffers," Basil sniffed nobly. "I say, chaps, is that a piece of torn cloth on that bush behind you?"

Jess bounded over and retrieved the scrap of material. "Indeed it is. Red and yellow, just like that covering the fox ducked under as we came out of the Abbey gate."

They investigated, searching deeper into the woodland.

"Here's a broken branch. Rain never did that."

"Some bark's been scuffed from this willow here."

"Look, axle grease on the long grass!"

Matthias straightened up. "That's it. They did pass this way, cutting off the road and striking east through the forest. If we hurry we may catch them up before night. They can't travel fast in woodland pulling a cart."

"But what about the others?"

"Can't spare the time to fetch 'em, I'm 'fraid. Besides, they'd wander all over the show and hold us up."

'You're right, Basil, we can deal with the fox and his band if we take them by surprise. Let's leave a message at the roadside for Mrs. Church mouse and the others in case they come back looking for us. Here, I'll write on this haversack with some charcoal and we'll stand it on a stick by the side of the path."

"Capital wheeze, laddie buck. Right, forward the buffs and don't worry about B. Stag Hare esquire. It takes more than a splinter to keep a good scout down, y'know."

A short while later, the trio had struck off east into the wet woodlands of Mossflower.

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Mattimeo sat in frightened silence as Slagar undid the drawstring of his silk-patterned harlequin headcover.

"Watch, little one. Before I begin my story you must see this!" With a flick of his paw the fox whipped off the hood.

The young mouse swallowed hard. It was the most horrifying sight he had ever witnessed. Sugar's head was that of a normal fox, on the left side. His right side was hideous! Only the eye was alive and unwinking in the dead half of the sly one's face, the rest was scabrous furless flesh, with the side of the mouth twisted upward into a fiendish grin. Greenish gums and yellowed teeth hung out of the frozen jaw, and the skin beneath showed a mottled black and purple, hanging in folds, loose and lifeless.

Mattimeo was revolted, but he could not tear his eyes away from the awful sight. Slagar laughed, a short breathless cackle which trickled damply from the dreadful mouth.

"Look at me. Aren't I the pretty one?"

Mattimeo's stomach heaved queasily. "H-h-how did that happen?" he gasped.

Slagar hid the injured side of his face by holding the silken hood to it. "A long long time ago, or thaf s what it

seems like. Anyhow, it was before you were born. Iwasa wandering healer fox. Me and my mother, Sela the Vixen, knew many secrets of healing arts and the herbs, nostrums, potions and remedies of the forest. Eight seasons ago your Redwall creatures fought a great war with the rats from the north. It was woodlanders who betrayed my mother to the rats. They speared her and she was left to die in a ditch. I was wounded and captured by those at Redwall. They held me prisoner in a room called the infirmary. Oh, they said it was only until I got well, but I knew better. A prisoner is a prisoner, no matter what they call the place where they keep him from his freedom and deny him liberty. So one afternoon, while your father's precious creatures were about their business, I escaped!

"Haha, no creature can keep me locked up for long," he continued. "As payment for my troubles I took some baubles from Redwall with me, silly little things, bits and pieces. As I ran from the Abbey I was stopped by some silly old mouse, some buffer called Methuselah, so I killed him. It was no great fight; his head cracked the wall and that was that. I was forced to flee for my life, with that great badger and a horde of woodlanders behind me. Deep into Mossflower I ran. I knew it well in those days. There was a hiding place, a small cave beneath the stump of a tree, and I hid there. If I had not been forced into hiding I would have escaped unharmed. Anyhow, there I was, hiding while half of the stupid Redwall creatures crashed around Mossflower trying to find me. I did not know that there was another creature in the darkness of that little cave with me, but there was. It was a serpent, a huge adder. I must have touched it in the darkness because it struck and sank its fangs in me, right here."

Slagar pointed to his disfigured face, just under the jaw. "Any other creature would have been instantly slain," he boasted. "Not me, though. I must have lost consciousness, because when I awoke it had dragged me

through the forest to its lair. I was in burning agony, deep paralyzing pain. Somewhere near me I could hear the snake sleeping. Silently I dragged myself away from that terrible snake's lair and out of that place of death. I hid out in Mossflower for two seasons. All the autumn and winter I lay in a den, treating myself with every herb, root, cure, poultice, medicine and nostrum I knew. Sometimes the pain was so great that I thought I must surely die, but I kept myself alive with secret remedies known only to healer foxes. Magic passed on to me by my mother, combined with the thought that one day I would grow wefl and strong enough to take my revenge upon Redwall, kept me alive better than herbs. I stayed alive to wreak vengeance upon those who had caused this injury to me, to make them weep bitter tears for my pain."

With a quick movement Slagar donned his hood and fastened the drawstring.

"You lie!" Mattimeo protested. "The creatures of Redwall would never hold or imprison an innocent creature who had harmed nobody. Our infirmary is for the sick, not for captives. You have not mentioned my father. What harm has he ever done to you?"

The Sly One leapt up, kicking Mattimeo hard.

"Silence! Who are you to dare talk to me? I am Slagar the Cruel. My revenge is against all Redwall, and your father is the very symbol of all it stands for. He even robbed me of my revenge against the serpent by killing it with his magic sword. He will learn the meaning of pain. Not a bodily pain as I have suffered, no, this will be a far more worrying agony, the loss of his one and only son. Halftail! Take this slave back and chain him with the others."

As Mattimeo was led away Slagar called after him, "Tell your friend the squirrel that you have talked with the Son of Sela."

The young mouse's friends had not slept. They lay half in and half out of the pelting rain, miserably wondering where Mattimeo had been taken. Suddenly Auma

nudged Tim, pointing to the two figures that materialized out of the downpour. They breathed a sigh of relief, seeing it was Mattimeo with one of the guards.

Haiftail pushed them aside roughly as he linked the young mouse back onto the running chain. "Move over, you lot. Make space here, your little pal's back."

They wriggled back, as far under the bushes as they could. It was a bit drier there. Tim, Tess, Auma and Sam listened intently as Mattimeo related Slagar's story. When he had finished, Sam gave them the real version of what had happened that night long ago.

"I remember what took place. 11m and Tess wouldn't, they were only tiny infants, and you weren't even born then, but I was a season and a half old. Though I couldn't talk much, I could see and hear well enough. If that fox is the son of Sela, then his name is Chickenhound, or at least it was then. He and his mother were traitors. Posing as healers, they acted as spies for the rats, but they tried selling information to both sides. Like all traitors, they were discovered. The rats speared him and his mother and left them in a ditch. Sela died, but Chickenhound was only wounded. He dragged himself to Redwall, so we took him in and cared for him. He repaid our hospitality by stealing a sackful of the Brothers' and Sisters' possessions and murdering old Methuselah, our recorder. Chickenhound ran away and was never heard of again, until now."

Mattimeo lay back in the damp grass. "What a pity that the snake didn't finish him off. He's still a sly fox, but completely insane. The snake poison and his desire for revenge have twisted his mind until he actually believes his own story and really thinks he is in the right."

Threeclaws poked his ugly head under the bushes at them. "Hoi! Get to sleep in there and no talking, or I'll lay a cane across your backs!"

Tiny streams leapt and gurgled, rivers overran their banks, the rain poured relentlessly down on Mossflower

Woods, rattling off the leaves, slopping in the undergrowth, spattering summer flowers until they bent their heads under the weight of water. Beneath the shrubbery between the oak and the beech trees, the young prisoners chained on the slave line slept fitfully, knowing that in a short time they would be brutally roused and forced to march again.

Midafternoon found Matthias, Basil and Jess still striking east into Mossflower. They were constantly finding evidence that the cart had travelled in this direction, such as crushed leaves, broken branches and bruised bark, but Mathias noticed that Basil did not look too pleased with the situation.

"Whaf s the matter, Basil? We're on the right trail, aren't we?"

The lanky hare pawed rainwater out of his left ear, shaking his head. "Oh, we're on some sort of trail, old mousemate, but there's quite a few things I'm not happy about, doncha know. One is this infernal rain. I was built for dry sunny flatlands, not great soppin' forests. Then there's this cart. There's supposed to be a band of slavers with at least three captives, though I'd say a bunch more if they'd been out robbin' young uns. Doesn't it strike you as peculiar that there are very few pawtracks about? We've only seen the odd one, or maybe two at the most. Now, they can't all travel in the cart, 'cos there's nothin' to pull it, except themselves. Got me? And if they were pullin' it an' walkin' alongside it, there'd be a lot more tracks of pawprints, mud churned up and so on."

Matthias agreed with Basil's shrewd observations. "You're right of course. That suggests two things: either we're walking into a trap, or if s just a ruse to lure us away from the real trail that the fox and his band have taken."

Just then Jess Squirrel tumbled down from a sycamore. She was holding a paw to her mouth for silence.

"Ssshh! I was climbing a few trees to get my bearings and guess what? I've spotted the cart up ahead."

"Where?" Matthias asked.

"About half a short march away on the bank of a stream. There doesn't seem to be any beast with it, though. No sign of our young uns."

Matthias drew his sword. "Let's go carefully. They may be somewhere about, so keep low. Jess, you lead the way."

Silently as rain mist the three slid through the trees and bushes, their senses alert, ready to spring into action at the turn of a leaf. Matthias grasped the great sword of Redwall tight in

both paws. Holding it upright, he peered across its double-edged blade, hoping fervently for a single glimpse of Slagar the masked fox.

Crouching low, they skirted a small grove of evergreens, the falling rain covering any slight pawnoise that was made. Jess quietly blew raindrops from her whiskers as she beckoned them to stop.

"See, over there, to the left of the rowan tree."

Sure enough, there stood the cart, its gaily painted wheels and sideboards spattered with mud and scratched by branches. Over the top they could see the coloured canvas lying heaped upon the cart bed.

"Waitin' orders, sah. What do we do now, old scout?" Basil murmured.

Matthias weighed up the situation. "Well, we've got it covered from this side, and the stream's at its back. Lefs just lie here a moment and keep our eyes open for any signs of life."

"Signs of life? Say no more, old warrior chops. That bally canvas on the old cart is movin'."

There was a muted growling noise from the cart bed as the canvas twitched and bulged. Matthias issued orders.

"Jess, you take the right, Basil, the left. I'll go in front and center. Careful now, if it is anything dangerous then be sure to give me room for a good swordstroke. Come on."

The warrior mouse gave Basil and Jess a moment to

slip off and take up their positions, then he stood upright and walked silently to the cart,

sword held at the ready.

Basil and Jess arrived at opposite ends of the cart at the same time as Matthias arrived in front of it. Taking up a stance with the deadly blade held ready for a thrust and slash, the warrior mouse nodded to his companions.

Simultaneously Basil and Jess grabbed opposite ends of the canvas and swept it off with one sudden heave. Matthias bounded onto the cart with a mighty leap, swinging the sword and roaring.

"RedwaaaalllV."

At the last moment Matthias swung the sword away. It struck the iron seatbar, sending sparks showering as a fat little otter lay in the cart with his bottom in the air and his head covered by both paws.

"Strike me rudder I didn't steal your rotten old cart. I only wanted to play on it shiver me masts I ain't messed it up or broke nothin', on me affydavet I 'aven't," he shouted in a continuous babble.

Having said his piece, the otter bounded over the side of the cart towards the river, but Jess leapt with him and caught him by the scruff of his neck. The sword had sprung from Matthias's smarting paws upon impact with the metal, and stood quivering in the earth, a hairVbreadth away from Basil's injured paw.

Matthias jammed his paws into his mourn. Sucking furiously, he did a small dance as vibrating pain lanced through them.

Jess shook the fat little otter soundly. "Be still, you little wretch, or I'll run you up a tall oak and drop you off the top!"

Basti sniffed disdainfully, stepped around the sword and confronted the captive. "A little water pirate, eh? Right, laddie, name, rank and number. Quick as y'like now and no fibs, whaf re you doin' in that cart? Where's your slaver band got to? Whaf ve you done with our young uns? Speak up, you blinkin' rapscallion!"

The small otter reached behind him and tickled Jess

suddenly. She let go of him with a whoop. He looked at Matthias and nodded towards Basil.

"Stow me oars, 'e's a funny rabbit, that'n. Talks nice, though."

Matthias and Jess burst out laughing at the creature's impudence.

Basil stalked off towards the stream, muttering to himself in a huff, "Funny rabbit, indeed. No manners at all, these water-wallopers. Shouldn't be surprised if his mother's tattooed and chews shrimp a lot."

Matthias sat down in a dry spot under the cart and beckoned to the otter.

"C'mere, young un. Come and talk to me. I've got a son about your age. Come on, you've no need to be frightened."

The little fat otter laughed. He flung himself under the cart and kicked at the axles and wheel spokes.

"Heehee, this is better'n playin' on top of the cart," he giggled. "My name's Cheek. What's yours?"

"Matthias of Redwall. What are you doing here, Cheek?"

"Oh, just playin' and sportin'. I like playin' and sportin'. EXyou?"

"I did when I was your age. Tell me, were there any other creatures with this cart when you first saw it?"

"Stow me oars, I'll say there was. Two wicked old weasels, they called theyselves Deadnose an' Fengal. I stowed meself in the bushes an' watched 'em, so I did."

Basil and Jess came to join Matthias when they heard this. Cheek looked from the squirrel to the hare. "Whaf s your names, you two?" he asked.

"Cheek's the right name for you, me laddo," Basil snorted. "You tefl us what those two weasels were saying."

Cheek giggled again. "Heehee, tell you nothin' 'til you tell me your names."

Matthias nudged Basil. "Tell him your name and let him get on with his information."

"What? Oh, righto. Allow me to introduce meself, young Cheek. I'm Basil Stag Hare, veteran scout and retired foot fighter, doncha know."

Cheek giggled yet again. He was an inveterate giggler.

"Barrel Stick Chair? Silly name. Who's the mouse with the brush on her tail?"

Basil went a peculiar shade of red around his ears and cheeks. He was about to give Cheek a piece of his mind when Jess interrupted.

"My name is Jess Squirrel. How do you do?"

Cheek rattled a twig around the wheelspokes. "I'm fine, Jeff. How are you?"

Jess was about to grab the young otter and teach him some manners when Matthias gave her a wink and signalled his haversack.

"Mmmm, I'm about ready for a late lunch. What d'you say to a vegetable pastie and a drop of cider, Jess?"

Jess opened her pack. "I think I'll have a bilberry muffin and some cheese."

Basil undid his haversack. "Er, lessee, I fancy a few slices of nutbread and some candied chestnuts. Yes, that should be just the ticket."

They pulled out the food and began eating with much munching, slurping and satisfied sighs. Cheek reached for a candied chestnut, but Basil slapped his paw.

"I'm 'ungry," the little otter said, giving them what he thought was a pitiful look.

Basil licked crumbs from his whiskers. "So you're 'ungry, eh? That's funny, I thought you were Cheek."

Cheek attempted a half-giggle. "H'hee, no, I mean I want food."

Matthias nibbled the end of his pastie. "Ah good, we're acting sensible at last. Right, information first, food later."

Cheek eyed the food longingly. "Well, them two weasels I was tellin' you of, they said to each other: 'Lef s dump the cart here and get back to the others.' That was Fengal, of course. Then Deadnose, he says:

Tttght, mate, I'm sick of trailin' this old thing around the forest in the rain. If we dump it here and now we can be back with Slagar and the rest by tomorrow night.' Then they just leaves it 'ere an' off they goes. An' thaf s all I 'card, so where's me vittles?"

Jess covered the food with her haversack. "Not so fast, Which way did they go and how long ago was that?"

Cheek waved his right paw. "Straight that way, must 'ave been about midmornin' or so."

Basil stopped him as he made for the food again. "Just two more things, you little blot. Whaf s my name and what is that good lady squirrel called?"

Cheek looked seriously hungry. "You're Basil Stag Hare and that squirrel's called Jess."

"Aye, and don't you forget it, young rip. Come on, tuck in."

Cheek went at the food like a savage wolfpack. What he couldn't swallow he packed into his cheeks like a hamster, and what he couldn't pack into his cheeks he tried to grab with his paws. Chuckling, Basil rolled him from under the wagon.

"I'd sooner keep you a day than a season, Cheek. Go on, be off with you now, back to your mum and dad."

Cheek swallowed enough to allow himself to speak. "Mums'n'dads? Cheek doesn't 'ave mums'n'dads. I want to go with you."

Matthias shook his head. "I'm afraid if s a long and dangerous journey. You might get hurt."

Cheek giggled and rolled under the wagon again. "Cheek doesn't get 'urt. Take me with you if

I give you some more information, good information, somethin' that only Cheek knows at the moment," he begged.

They looked at one another. Basil and Jess nodded. Matthias thought for a moment, then he too nodded.

"Go on then. Cheek. Give us your good information and maybe we'll let you come with us," the warrior mouse agreed.

Cheek sprang from underneath the cart and spread his

paws wide. "If s stopped rainin'. 'ow's that for good information?"

Basil clapped his paws together. "Absolutely top-hole, Cheek old lad. Top marks for ingenuity. Matthias, I think we need a brainy feller Uke this if we're to get anywhere. What d'you say?"

The warrior mouse picked up his sword. "Aye, top marks for sheer cheek. Well, come on then, sir, seeing as you've no mum or dad, but behave yourself."

The sky had ceased its weeping over Mossflower. Grey clouds started rolling back to reveal a powder-blue vault above, and warmth began seeping through to dry the woodlands as the sun continued its journey into summer. White feathery steam rose in banks off trees, grass, flowers and shrubs as the four companions stepped out on the track the two weasels had taken.

Toward evening, Mrs. Churchmouse led the members of the original search party back through the main gates of Red wall Abbey. She made her report to Constance and the Abbot, showing them the empty food bag they had found on the road.

"We travelled north until midday, then we turned back for Matthias, Basil and Jess, wondering what had become of them. When we reached the spot we had rested at in the morning we found this."

Abbot Mordalfus turned the bag over and read the wording that had been written in charcoal. "East thro' woods, signs of cart, B. S. Hare."

Constance inspected the bag. "Good, they've found tracks. If ever there were three who could follow a trail, fight an enemy and bring the young ones back, if s Matthias, Basil and Jess."

Mrs. Churchmouse's lip quivered. "Oh, I do wish I could have gone with them, just to see my Tim and Tess again."

Constance patted her paw. "There, there. Don't upset

yourself. We all would have liked to have gone with them, though you had more right than most. Those three won't rest until the young ones are safe, you'll see. Why, one day pretty soon now I wouldn't be at all surprised to hear banging on the gate and find Matthias, Basil and Jess standing there with the young ones looking hungry as hawks and ready for supper. Why don't you go and see how baby Rollo is? He's been asking after you, and Cornflower will have a nice bowl of mint tea waiting for you. Look in on Mr. Churchmouse too. You'll find he's a lot better."

Mrs. Churchmouse sniffled a bit, then smiled. "Thank you, Constance, you are so kind and thoughtful. My my, just look at all the mud and wet on these clothes. I'd better go and put some nice-clean dry ones on."

When Mrs. Churchmouse had departed, Constance turned to the Abbot.

"Gone east, eh," she mused. "Seems funny, taking the north road and then turning east. Why didn't they just leave through the east gate and go direct through Mossflower? It would have got them to where they were going a lot quicker if they really were travelling east."

The Abbot sat forward in his chair. "Exactly! If they really were travelling east. I don't like it, Constance. Foxes were ever the sly ones. Who can tell what goes on in the mind of a thief and a trickster. I am not at all happy about this whole affair, though I've no doubt that Matthias,

Basil and Jess will sort it out and win through eventually. But suppose they are following a false trail?"

"What could we do about it?" The big badger shrugged. "We are in Redwall, they are out there, somewhere. Goodness knows where; Mossflower is a big country."

The Abbot touched a paw to the side of his head. "They are the doers, we are the thinkers. Do not forget, this Abbey was built by doers, but it took thinkers to conceive the plans."

"I agree. Father Abbot, but how do we go about helping them by thinking?"

The Abbot rose from his chair and picked up a lantern. "Sleep, my old friend. Dreams are a good starting place. Dream and think, of Redwall, of Matthias and our friends, of the young ones taken captive and of the evil ones who hold them in bondage. Come and see me in the morning. We will breakfast together and tell each other what we dreamed and thought."

Constance smiled. The old Abbot made it all sound so simple, but the best answers were the simplest, when all was said and done.

The evening sun sank slowly in the west as the bells tolled out over Redwall, heralding the calm after the storm.

With the passing of the rains, hot sunlight lanced through the upper foliage, and white steam tendrils curled and wraithed, climbing between the golden sunshafts to escape on the warm thermals. Mattimeo grunted with exertion as he pulled his paws from a morass of earth and leaves which the dragging limbs of the column were laboriously pounding into thick mud. Chained paws, warm soggy habits and the driving canes of the slavers gave little relief to the caravan of young animals. The running chain snagged between branches, got caught around bushes and tripped them when they least expected it. Sam caught a quick drink of water trickling from the broad steins of wild rhubarb, and he managed to grab a pawful of cloudberries as he passed, signalling to the others where they grew so they could follow his example. Auma munched the pitiful repast as she conversed with Tim in low tones.

"I've lost all sense of direction. All I know now is whether if s night or day," she remarked.

Tim trudged stolidly on. "We're travelling south. Where to, I don't know. I've been watching the signs my parents taught me to look for if ever I got lost in the woodlands; moss on trees, the position of the sun, even the earth down this way is different, more stones in

the soil. You can take my word for it, Auma. South it is."

Mattimeo joined in the conversation. "I know we're tired and worn out, but pass the word along. Keep alert for the chance to escape. Slagar and his band must be as weary as we are."

Tim shrugged. "How are we supposed to escape, chained together like this?"

Cynthia Bankvole listened to them talking and began to get very upset. "Please, don't escape and leave me here, I couldn't bear it."

Mattimeo ground his teeth together. "Don't worry, Cynthia. If we escape we'll take you with us."

"Oh, no, leave me here," Cynthia begged. "Slagar would catch me and beat me and break my legs and leave me to die in a ditch. I'd be too afraid to escape."

Mattimeo was about to ask Cynthia just what it was she really wanted, when he checked himself.

"Hush now, Cynthia," Tess soothed her. "Don't you fret, we won't make you do anything you don't wish to do. Listen, there's probably a whole army from Redwall out searching for us. Who knows, they might not be far behind us."

Auma became excited. "Of course! Mattimeo's father is a great warrior. I'll bet he's gathered all his fighting friends together and is hot on our trail. I know my father will be searching, though he's a plains badger and I'm not too sure whether he knows his way about in woodland."

Mattimeo shook his head reprovingly at Tess. "Who's being unkind now, eh, Tess? Don't you realize we've had a couple of days' heavy rain? Not even Basil Stag Hare could follow our trail through that, and we're well dear of the Redwall area now. Another thing, I'd like to bet that Slagar has laid some sort of false track to put them off the scent. You're only raising vain hopes by talking of things like that."

"Well, any hope's better than none!" Tess sniffed.

A stoat called Badrag strode past them, waving his cane.

"Come on, come on, less gabbin' and more marchin', you tot. The faster you march the quicker you'll get to rest. Move yourselves now, step lively."

He carried on up the line, urging others on. When he was out of earshot Sam spoke up.

"I think Mattimeo is right. We should be trying to help ourselves and not waiting for others. I know there'll be a big search party out from Red wall, but it'd take a miracle to find us in this deep woodland after all that rain. The only thing I'd say is do the sensible thing, don't try any silly moves, and if any creature sees the chance of an escape, let us know so that we can organize it properly. Cynthia was right when she said what Slagar would do to anybody he caught trying to escape."

Vitch darted through the bushes. He caught Sam a glancing blow, which was partly softened by the young squirrel's bushy tail.

"You talk too much, squirrel. Talking's not allowed between slaves. Another word out of you and I'll whack you proper!"

Sam's eyes narrowed and he growled dangerously at Vitch, The undersized rat swung the willow cane at him. With a lightning-fast move, Sam snatched the willow withe and snapped it. He flung the broken cane at Vitch, his teeth showing white and sharp.

"One day I'm going to get free of these chains, rat," Sam vowed. "When I do, all the canes in the forest won't stop me getting you!"

"Thaf s if I don't get him first!" Mattimeo interrupted.

Vitch's nerve failed him. He dashed off up the line.

"Yah, you won't get loose where you're going!" he called back.

The rat ran straight into Slagar. The fox cuffed him soundly and threw him to the ground.

"Stow the noise, addlebrains! The rest of you, get the prisoners between those two big firs over there and secure the line chain. Threedaws, come with me. I saw something interesting a while back. Wartclaw, you and

no

Badrag are in charge. Feed that lot and keep 'em quiet. Be ready to travel the moment I return. Got that?" "Aye, aye, Chief."

The captives found good dry grass to lie upon. It was nearing sunset now, and songbirds were shrilling their last plaintive tunes before nightfall. Cynthia Bankvole found some dried moss, which they stuffed between the manacles and their limbs. It was comforting and soothing. Tim shared some wild fennel and green acorns he had gathered on the day's march.

Auma lay with her chin on her paws, staring into the forest ahead of them. She was very tired and thinking of nothing in particular when she found herself staring into the eyes of a large

frilled newt. The creature winked at her with his flat moist eyes.

"Little stripedog all chained up. Sillybeast, why d'you lettem do that to yer?" he asked.

"We've been captured by Slagar and his band. Who are you?" Auma whispered urgently as she called the others with a wave of her paw.

Mattimeo prodded Cynthia. "Keep an eye on the guards. Let's see what this fellow has to say."

The newt crawled a little closer, lying low to keep his bright red underbelly from showing.

"Name's Scurl Droptail. Too clever to lettem chain me up. See 'em pass here before, fox an' weaselfellers."

"Scurl, can you help us?" Mattimeo tried hard to keep his voice calm.

The newt blinked and wobbled his crest. "Why'11 Scurl help you sillybeasts? Not lendin' yer my keys. Scurl got many keys, special keys, open any lock."

"He's got keys!" Tess murmured to Mattimeo so Scurl could not hear. "We must try to borrow them."

Mattimeo licked dry lips, then spoke earnestly to the newt.

"Scurl, you must realize our position. We're in danger, We might never see our homes again. You must lend us

in

your keys. I promise we won't keep them. We only want to borrow them for a moment."

The newt dosed his eyes and shot his tongue in and out as if he were in deep thought. Then one eye opened.

"Wotchergot? Cummon, wotchergot, 'ey? Ifll cost you, oh yes, cost you. Scud's keys don't borrow fer nothin' no, no."

Sam nodded. "That's fair enough, Scurl. Wait there a moment, will you."

They huddled together, whispering.

"What do we use to bargain? I've got nothing," Mattimeo said.

Auma produced some pressed blue flowers. "They're mountain flowers. My father used to find them for me. They might not be worth anything, but they're pretty. Bet he's never seen mountain flowers."

Tim spat something out and dried it on his habit sleeve. "My lucky green stone, though if s not brought me much luck. I'm always sucking it. Look, if s quite flat."

Mattimeo looked from one to another. "Anything else?"

Tess took an object on a thong from about her neck. "This is my seasonday gift from Mum. If s a carved beechnut shaped like a bell."

Sam reluctantly undid something that was hidden by the long brush of his tail. He tossed it in with the pitiful collection. "Mum's champion climber tailbracelet Ifs made from baked day and reedgrass, painted three different colours too. I borrowed it to wear for the feast that night."

Mattimeo unfastened his soft white habit girdle. "Suppose I'd better throw this in too. Dad

said it belonged to old Abbot Mortimer before my time. Ifs a nice one."

"Let me do this," Tess offered. She gathered the objects up and signalled to the newt.

Cynthia Bankvole hissed a warning, remaining frozen in her upright position on watch. Immediately the newt

dropped out of sight and the companions lay flat as if asleep.

Wartclaw strode over. He tickled Cynthia under her chin with his cane.

"Not sleepy, eh, missie?"

"Er, no sir," Cynthia gulped. "I can't seem to get any sleep."

"Well, you ought to take lessons from your little pals yonder. Look, they're snoozin' like a pile of bees trying to last out the winter."

Cynthia was too petrified even to look. She sat staring at Wartclaw with the cane pressing painfully into her throat. Wartdaw gave the cane a hard shove, sending Cynthia flat on her back, both chained paws clutching her neck.

"Get to sleep before I tuck you in with this cane, vole, and don't let me catch you napping when we start to march again," Wartclaw's voice hissed dose to her ear.

He strode off, chuckling to himself and shaking his head. "Must've had a featherbed life in that Redwall place before we got our daws on 'em. . . . Huh, can't sleep, sir!"

Cynthia sat up partially. "He's gone now. Oh, do hurry up!" she said, her voice trembling.

Scurl scampered swiftly up and seized the things the others had collected for him.

"Hmm, notmuch, notmuch. Funny bell, though. Nice ring, soft white rope, nice on Scurl." He held the white habit girdle against his red underside.

Tess gave a look of mock admiration. "Oh, that does look nice on you. Now put the bracelet on your tail. No, like this. Let me see ... oh yes, hang my beechnut bell around your neck. Very handsome. Tuck the blue flowers in the thong up by your frill. There! You can carry the green stone."

Auma placed a paw upon Scud's back. "Just a moment, where's the keys?"

The newt gave her a scornful glance. "Don't carryem. Huh, wouldn't carryem, gotter go for em."

Auma kept her paw firmly on Scurl. "How do I know you'U come back?"

Scurl stood upright, his eyes wide and a dignified expression upon his face. "Stripedog, you be no woodlander, right?"

Auma nodded glumly. "No, I'm from the western plain. I'm a flatland badger."

"I be woodlander, tellem 'bout woodlander rule, mouse." Scurl smiled disarmingly.

Tess turned to Auma. "He's right, we have a woodland code. All honest and true woodlanders are pledged to help each other and never to harm a living creature."

Scurl removed Auma's paw and patted it in a friendly way. "You see, stripedog."

Before anyone could lay another paw on him, Scurl was away like a streak. He dashed back into the long grass, far from where the chained-up captives could reach him. They could see the red flash of his underside as he danced and pranced about.

"Sillybeast, sillybeast, trusting me.

Made you think I had a key.

Stupid you, clever me, '

Scurl has pretty gifts for free."

Angrily Auma tore up a huge sod of earth and flung it with all her strength.

Qumph!

It struck Scurl, knocking him flat. The crested newt lay for a moment then pulled himself up, spitting out gritty black earth and rubbing soil from his eyes.

"Might have adda key, might have letcher free, but you'U never know now, willyer."

He scampered off into the night forest.

"Whaf s all the shouting about here?"

Slagar and Threeclaws stood over the captives. Between them they had a small hedgehog. Threeclaws stooped to manacle the hedgehog to the running chain.

"I said, what's all the noise about?" Slagar repeated.

Tim grunted wearily. "Oh, nothing really. That great lump of a badger was rolling over in her sleep and pulling me about on the chain."

Slagar kicked at Auma, "Well, you won't have to worry about sleeping right now, we're marching again."

A groan arose from the prisoners. Threeclaws ignored it, and glanced across his shoulder into the woodlands.

"Come on, lef s get moving. We can be well away from this place by morning," he said.

Slagar called Vitch. "You and Browntooth stop at the rear and cover the tracks. I don't want that hedgehog's family knowing which way we've gone."

Sleepily they ploughed onward through the night-time woodland. A crescent moon above winked at them through the softly swaying treetops. Mattimeo caught a glance of Tess. She was brushing away a tear.

"Tess, whaf s the matter?"

The little churchmouse sniffed and dried her eyes.

"Oh, if s nothing. Only that seasonday present was the last thing I had to remind me of Mum and Dad and Red wall. Do you think we'll ever see them again, Matti?"

Mattimeo suddenly felt grown up and responsible. "Of course we will, Tess. Take my word for it, I promise you."

"Thank you, Mattimeo." Tess managed a small smile. "The word of the Redwall Warrior's son is good enough for me."

"Stop that talking down there and get in line. Keep moving, d'you hear!"

The little hedgehog nudged Auma. "Where are they taking us? Do they always shout like that?"

"Hmm," the badger yawned. "They're always shouting about one thing or another, though where they're taking us, well, your guess is as good as mine. I'm Auma. What's your name?"

"Jube."

"That's a good name."

"Glad you like it. I don't. It's short for Jubilation. I'm the only male in a family of ten females. You should see my sisters, great big bullies they are. When I was bom Mum said to Dad: 'It's not a female. What'll we call him?' My old dad was so pleased he shouted: 'O Jubilation!' But you can call me Jube. I'd dearly hate to be this Slagar fox when my family catches up with him and these rascals."

For the first time in a long while the friends found themselves chuckling at the young hedgehog. He seemed quite unconcerned that he had been made captive, looking on it as only a temporary measure until his family caught up with the slavers.

Mattimeo dearly wished he could share Jube's optimism.

Cheek the young otter was never still. He kept bounding ahead of Jess, Matthias and Basil and running back to chide them.

"Come on, it'll be the middle of next season before we get anywhere, the way you plod along."

Basil sniffed and shot a frosty glare at Cheek. "Out of m'way, scallawag. We're following a trail and you're jumping over the pawprints. See, Matthias, here and here. I'd stake me reputation there's two of 'em. Weasels, prob'ly."

Cheek wrinkled his whiskers impudently. "Oh, for goodness sake! I know that, I've found their weapons up ahead."

Jess grabbed Cheek by the paw. "Where? Why didn't you tell us?"

"Huh, 'cos you never asked me, thaf s why. You're always too busy tellin' me off. TDon't run, come here, go there.

Jess released the young otter. "Right, show us."

They ran behind Cheek as he bounded and scampered between the trees in the early morning sunlight. Suddenly he stopped and pointed.

Matthias was hurrying forward when Basil pulled him bock as his paws began sinking.

"Steady on, old chum, if s a bally swamp. Now then, young feller m'laddo, see the danger of dashing ahead?"

The Warrior hopped to the firm ground, aided by Basil. "Wait, I'll cut a long branch and we'll fish those weapons back."

It was the work of a moment for Matthias to lop off a long larch branch. Jess held tight to Cheek as the young otter fished the weapons onto solid earth. They stood looking at the shattered spear and the curved sword which had been snapped clean through the center of its blade. Basil gave a low whistle of amazement as he turned the ruined weapons over with his paw.

"Blow me down, what sort of creature has the strength to do this?" he wondered.

Matthias tossed the larch branch like a spear. It hit the bogland and disappeared like a stone in water.

"Well, whoever it was, there were two weasels who were so terrified that they ran the wrong way."

"Yukk!" Cheek shuddered. "What a horrible way to die, swallowed up by a swamp."

"Aye," Basil Stag Hare nodded grimly. "Though 'twas all the villains deserved. Hmm, doesn't help us much, though. If we'd got to those two stinkers first we might have found out exactly where they were heading for. Now the bally old trail's completely cold."

Matthias silenced his companions with a wave of his paw. "Ssshhh! Don't say anything, just listen. What can you hear?"

Basil's ears twitched this way then that. He faced south with his whiskers aquiver. "Battle, fighting, some sort of old ruckus goin' on over that way, I think/'

The warrior mouse unloosed the great battle blade from its back sheath.

"Cheek, stay behind. Jess and Basil, come on, lef s take a look!"

Throughout the night Abbot Mordalfus had tossed and turned on his simple bed in the dormitories above Great

Hall. Sleep had eluded the old mouse. With the arrival of dawn's first light he rose and crept quietly between the sleeping ranks of woodlanders. Ambrose Spike snored gently, pausing to snuffle and mutter in his dreams as the Abbot stole past him and carefully lifted the door-latch.

The rising sun flooded through the high east windows, sending a cascade of golden light to wash the west side of Great Hall, turning the old red stone to a dusty rose pink. Mordalfus stood facing the wall, allowing the warmth to caress his back. Through half-dosed sleep-weary eyes, he looked upon the figure of Martin the Warrior at the center of the huge tapestry, bold and fearless. Swaying slightly on his paws, the Abbot spoke quietly to RedwaU's first warrior.

'It's not easy for the body to sleep when the mind is working all night. The hours pass like seasons. Tell me, my friend who never grows old, where are the answers to be found? It is a peaceful and glorious morning in the Slimmer of the Golden Plain. Who would think that evil is abroad on a day like this? Redwall is safe, yet it is in great danger if the future of its young ones is threatened. Help me to help Matthias. Which way will he go? What paths must he travel? Where is the hooded fox and his band bound for? I am the Abbot, but at heart I am only Brother Alf the pond-keeper. At times like this the burden of our Abbey and its creatures is too much for my old back to bear."

Mordalfus groaned slightly as he sat down upon the floor, an ancient mouse in his nightshirt. The rays of the warm sun caused his eyes to droop lower as he strove to concentrate upon the picture of Martin the Warrior. Gradually the likeness began to waver and sway in front of Mordalfus. Was it Martin he was gazing at? Or was it Matthias? Though it looked a lot like young Mattimeo. Strange, the tricks that two tired old eyes can play on their owner. His head drooped lower. Now he had no need to look up at the tapestry, for Martin was right in

front of him. From far away, as though it were through the mists of summers long dead and gone, the Warrior's voice came softly across the roof of time:

"Seek the Founder in the stones where die little folk go-"

"Father Abbot, I'm surprised at you, sleepwalkin' in your nightshirt!"

"Eh, what, who?" Mordalfus came awake to find Constance the badger shaking him.

"Better not let Sister May catch you dressed like that, or she'll dose you with herbs against the cold. Come on, old feller, up on your paws now."

The Abbot rubbed his eyes with shaky paws as he allowed Constance to stand him upright. "Constance, oh, it's you! Ooh, I'm stiff. Couldn't sleep a wink all night, so 1 wandered down here at dawn to have a word with Martin."

The badger chuckled as she escorted the Abbot to breakfast at Cavern Hole. "Yes, I often have a word or two with our Warrior myself, though he never says anything to me. Still, it's a comfort sometimes to think that he's probably listening."

The Abbot halted. After cleaning his tiny spectacles on his sleeve he donned them, looking over the tops at the badger.

"Ah, but he spoke to me, just before you woke me."

Constance felt a cold prickle along the back of her neckfur. "Indeed, and what did he have to say to you?"

"Seek the Founder in the stones where the little folk

g-" "Was that all?"

"Every single word."

"I wonder what Martin meant by that," Constance mused.

"So do I, friend. Lefs have breakfast and think about it."

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Ambrose Spike and Brother Rufus had prepared the breakfast. The Abbot and Constance took their place at the large table with other Redwallers. Gossip flowed freely as bowls were passed to and fro, butter, oatcakes, fresh fruit, cinnamon toast, honey and pitchers of fresh cold milk. In the bell tower, baby Rollo and John Churchmouse had begun tolling the twin bells. Cornflower passed toast to Mrs. Churchmouse.

"Your John is a far better teacher than you or I. Listen, baby Rollo's actually pealing in time with him," she remarked.

Mrs. Churchmouse toyed with the toast and honey. "If 11 take them some time to be as good at it as my Tim'n'Tess, though. Poor mites, I do hope that fox isn't making them suffer." A tear fell into the bowl of milk alongside the little mousemother.

Cornflower put a brave face on. "What, those two rascals! If I know anything, they'll have him run ragged. The things these two get up to with my Matti and Sam Squirrel!"

"Seek the Founder in the stones where the little folk

g-" Silence fell upon the table. Ambrose Spike turned to

the Abbot. "Funny thing to say. What does it mean?"

Constance shrugged. "We don't know. Martin the Warrior spoke to the Abbot a short while ago, and thaf s all he said: 'Seek the Founder in the stones where the Httie folk go.'"

Mordalfus stood up. "I'm going to get dressed. See if any of you can make head or tail of it. It may be a message to help us find our young ones."

Winifred the otter shook her head. "But Matthias, Basil and Jess are out looking for them. They must be far away by now. Supposing we did find any clues, how would we let them know when we don't even know where they are?"

Constance wagged a toast crust thoughtfully. "Good question. I've had an idea. The rain has cleared now and

the weather is good, so why don't we send Warbeak and the Sparra warriors out? There are enough of them, and if they fly off in different directions following the general path Matthias took, surely they must find them sooner or later."

Cornflower poured milk for herself. "Sooner, I hope." Mrs. Churchmouse got up busily from the table. A look of resolution had replaced the sadness upon her face. "Well, at least we can be doing something instead of sitting around moping and leaving it ail to Matthias, Basil and Jess. Everybody search, hunt, seek, high and low. Try and find something out about Martin's words. What were they?"

"Seek the Founder in the stones where the little folk go," Constance repeated.

A short time later, Cavern Hole lay deserted. Paws sounded upon stairs, doors slammed, walls were tapped, and all round Redwall Abbey voices echoed: "Seek the founder in the stones where the little folk go."

-v"

Though the captives were hurried along, the going became easier. Thick forest gave way to grassy clearings, and rocks were much in evidence now, with here and there a large stony hill rearing out of the woodlands. As they marched, Mattimeo and his friends were able to gather fair quantities of cloudberry and pennycress, supplemented with hard pears and crab apples. Slagar was becoming more cautious, forever watching ahead and detailing guards to cover their tracks from the rear.

Vitch caught up with Threeclaws. "What's the fox watchin' out for, more slaves?"

The weasel curled his lip at the undersized rat. "What he's lookin' out for is his own business and none of yours, noseywhiskers. You just keep your eyes on those prisoners."

"Ha, you're only sayin' that 'cos you don't know yourself," Vitch sneered. "Bet you don't even know where we're going."

Slagar had heard Vitch. He stood still until the unsuspecting rat caught up with him. Then the sly one stepped on the rat's tail, stopping him short.

"So, you want to know where we're going, eh, Vitch?"

The rat gulped and shrugged nervously. "Er, no, not really."

The silken mask sucked into a hideous grin. 'Then thaf s good, Vitch, good. Because it's no use asking this thick shower of tramps and scavengers. They don't know. Only one creature knows where we're going: me. When we get these slaves to their destination, you'll either end up very rich ... or very dead, if you keep asking about things that don't concern you."

Slagar strode off, leaving Vitch dumbfounded but thankful that he had only received a verbal reprimand for his curiosity.

"Did you hear that?" Mattimeo whispered to Jube. "Have you any idea where we're going?"

The young hedgehog nodded. "South. Thaf s the way that slave caravans always go. My dad an' mum said if s evil in the south. We never go there."

Shortly before noon they were in sight of two hills. Slagar called Threedaws and Halftail.

"We'll camp in the canyon between those two hills. Take the slaves up to the south end of it, there's flat rocks with a river running through the middle. Stake them out there awhile, feed 'em and let 'em sleep. I'll stay up this end of the gorge with Bageye, Skinpaw and Scringe, on top of that hill to the left. I want to see if we're being followed. If I signal you, then move this lot south, quick as you can. We'll catch up with you later."

Two stoats called Badrag and Browntooth walked alongside Mattimeo and the others. Sam and Auma began secretly baiting them. The squirrel and the young badger yawned loudly and stretched.

"Whoooyaawhhh! I'm almost asleep on my paws, Auma. What about you?"

"Whuuuyyaaaah! Never mind us, Sam, what about these poor guards? They've had their 'lails run off, marching and looking after us."

"You're right there, badger." Badrag rubbed his eyes and yawned. "Havin' to break camp and march in the middle of the night, keepin' you lot goin', takin' orders off Slagar. ..."

Sam nodded sympathetically. "Aye, not much of a life, is it."

Browntooth stubbed his paw on a rock. "Ouch! when are we goin' to stop and get a decent sleep an' something to eat, that's what I'd like to know."

"If s a shame," Auma clucked understandingly, "thaf s whatitis. Look, why don't I mind that big clumsy spear? You sit down on that rock and rest for a while. Sam, you'll mind Browntooth's old rusty sword for him, won't you?"

Sam smiled at Browntooth. "Of course. Anything for a friend. You slip me your sword and go and get yourself a little rest with Badrag."

The two stoats were nearly taken in until S la gar's voice called harshly from the head of the column, "Badrag, Browntooth! Stop yammering and get those prisoners moving. Come on, liven yourselves up!"

Badrag spat on his paws and rubbed them into his eyes as he quickened the pace. "Think you're clever, don't you, tryin' to get us in trouble with the Chief." Brown-tooth snarled at Sam and Auma. "Move along there. Come on, get those paws trottin', you slackers!"

Matthias was first at the scene of the battle, with Jess close behind him. Twelve hedgehogs were attacking a badger, nipping and bulling from all sides with claw, tooth and spike. The badger was a huge male, even bigger than Constance, He carried a large double-headed battieaxe, but he was only using the long wooden-poled handle to ward off his attackers. Time and again they would charge, hurling themselves at the big badger with savage grunting noises, but still he did not use the battleaxe Made. Squealing hedgehogs were tossed high into the bushes by long powerful sweeps of the handle, and now and again he would lash out with his paw, causing them to ball up and roll away. Regardless of the size and obvious danger of the badger, the hedgehogs continued to fight him aggressively. They were strong fighters. One of them, an old male, would call out at intervals.

"You great stripy varmint, give us back our Jubilation or we'll spike you dead, so we will!"

The badger's patience was wearing thin, but his great strength was unabated as he bared his teeth and yelled back, "What in thunder's a jubilation? You're all mad. Get back or I'll use this axe properly, on my oath as a warrior I will!"

Matthias, Jess, Basil and Cheek stood on the outskirts of the fight, completely ignored. The warrior mouse turned to Basil. "There seems to be something wrong here. Woodlanders don't usually fight each other this way. Maybe they know something about which way the fox has gone. I'm going in to break it up."

"Keep out of the way, young feller," Basil told Cheek. "Right, Matthias me old scout, lead on."

Matthias, Jess and Basil leapt into the fray, placing themselves around the badger. The warrior mouse brandished his sword and roared out, "A Redwall, a Redwall!"

Basil's voice joined Matthias's. "Blood'n'vinegar, mud'n'fur, up and at 'em!"

Jess's voice joined them both. "Treetops and timber. RedwaUlllI!"

Immediately the fighting ceased. The big badger and the twelve hedgehogs looked in surprise at the newcomers. Basil Stag Hare took charge.

"Steady in the ranks thah, chaps! Right, listen out now, all fightin' an' skirmishin' to cease forthwith. Otherwise this blighter here'll chop you into bits with the great sword of Redwall. Now, what's all the jolly old tiz-woz about, eh?"

The badger added his voice to those of the hedgehogs as they all began talking at once.

"He stole our Jubilation!"

"Rubbish, I've never even seen a jubilation!"

"Yew great stripy oT liar!"

"Liar yourself!"

"Don't you call her a liar or I'll break that there 'atchet over your skull, so I will!"

"I'd like to see you try it, spikebottom!"

"Ooh! EXyou 'ear wot 'e called me, Dad?"

"Never mind wot 'e called yew, sticks'n'stones won't break our bones. You just give us back our Jub'lation, badger."

Matthias struck the steel axehead with his sword blade. The sound rang out like a bell, restoring silence again. The warrior mouse pointed at the badger with his sword.

"One at a time, you first."

The badger leaned upon his axe haft, his powerful chest heaving. "My name is Orlando the Axe. I come from the western plain. My daughter Auma was taken by Siagar and his slavers, and I was searching for her when all these mad hedgehogs attacked me without any reason."

The old male hedgehog began dancing excitedly. "Harr, so that's it! Siagar an' his varmints, I might've knowed it. He's the one as stole our little Jubilation."

Matthias pointed the sword at the hedgehog. "Who are you and what is jubilation?"

The hedgehog waddled forward. He was the most untidy creature, with leaves, flowers, roots and creepers stuck to all his spines.

'Til tell yVho I am, young feller," he said. "I'm Jabez Stump. This here's my wife Rosyqueen and these are my ten daughters. I've got a son too, splendid liddle 'og, name of Jubilation, at least I did have a son till that thievin' fox passed this ways."

Matthias bowed. "I too had a fine young son stolen from me by Siagar. I am Matthias the Warrior of Redwall Abbey. Allow me to introduce my friends. This is Jess Squirrel, champion cumber and tree jumper. Her son Sam was also taken by Siagar, along with three others from our Abbey, two churchmice and a little volemaid. That young otter is Cheek, both by name and by nature. And last but not least, Basil Stag Hare, retired regimental scout and foot fighter."

Basil made an elegant leg. "At y'service, sah! Well, well, it seems that we all have a reason to catch up with that foul blot Slagar. I suggest we join forces. Actually, we lost the slavers' trail, and we'd be terribly glad of any help you could give us, wot?"

TT\e badger hefted his huge axe. "A sound proposition. I need help more than any beast. I'm hopelessly lost in these woods, and it was only by chance that I came this far. Bear in mind, though, I'll te extremely useful when we catch up with these slavers." Orlando accentuated this last remark by testing his axe blades on the side of his paw.

Jabez Stump and his brood drew to one side and had a whispered debate, then the hedgehog returned and offered his paw.

"So be it, we search together."

Matthias, Basil, Jess and Orlando linked paws with Jabez. "Together!"

Rosyqueen pointed the direction. "South, thaf s the way the slavers always travel, though no one knows what lies beyond the great Southern Plateau. But afore you travel you must eat

with us."

The Stump family lived in a great hollow beech tree that had fallen on its side. They were not very strong on table manners. Immediately the food was set out, the ten husky daughters threw themselves upon it and had to be beaten off by their father to make room for the guests. Matthias and his friends thanked them politely and carried their portions of woodland stew, acornbread and cider outside because of the lack of room in the hollow log. They sat on a grassy sward, eating and watching the incredible scene inside. Rosyqueen hit out indiscriminately with a heavy wooden ladle as the ten daaughters fought, bit, licked the stewpot, stole bread from each other and gen»rally created uproar in the limited space. "Bless their 'earts," Jabez Stump laughed. "The/s all fine big maids wi' 'ealthy appetites. You should see my

liddle Jube, though. He can outspike the lot o'them when 'e's at 'ome, hoho! It's a lifetime's work keepin' this lot fed, it is that."

By now the hedgehogs had finished the food and were starting to eat the soft wooden casing that formed the walls inside the log. Rosyqueen belabored them furiously until they spilled out onto the sward, tumbling and fighting for leftovers, so much so that Matthias and his friends were hard put to finish their meal in peace.

Jabez Stump tossed his soup bowl to one of them to lick as he stood up dusting his paws. "Right then, we about ready to start trackin'?"

They set off south, with Rosyqueen and the ten daughters waving a cheerful goodbye.

"You find them liddle uns now, d'you 'ear?"

"Aye, and bring us back some weasels to bully."

"If we ain't 'ere when you returns if 11 be 'cos we've etten the log an' gone a-searchin' for another. Goodbye!"

As Jabez was making his goodbyes, Basil Stag Hare whispered to Matthias and Orlando, "Some blighter's watching us from those bushes to the right."

Orlando moved casually in the direction of the bushes. "Leave this one to me."

But before the badger could move any further, Jess Squirrel was past him like a reddish streak. She flew into the bushes with a mighty leap and engaged the watcher. The foliage shook and trembled as the bushes thrashed noisily with the vigor of Jess's attack, and there were panicked cries from the shrubbery.

"Lemmego, lemmego! Ow ouch! Eek gurgh! You're hurting me!"

Jess emerged from the bushes, dragging Scurl the great frilled newt by his comb. "Oho, don't you worry, sloppyskin, I'll hurt you! I'll tear you in pieces and feed you to the Stump family if you don't tell me where you got my champion climber's tailring from."

She threw Scurl roughly to the ground. Completely

surrounded, the cheating reptile stared wide-eyed at Orlando, Jabez, Basil and Matthias. Using all his agility, he tried to make a swift escape, but the sword that buried itself in the ground at his nosetip and the immense war axe that thudded to earth a fraction from his tail warned him in no uncertain way that these creatures were warriors, not young woodland captives, and they meant business.

Scurl swallowed hard. "I can 'splain. I'll tell you everything!"

Matthias flicked the swordpoint against the frightened newt's pulsating throat.

"That's my son's habit cord you're wearing. I think you had better tell us everything. Now!"

Baby Rollo was singing again.

"Seeker Flounder inner stones, oho, I know where da lickle folks go."

Cornflower was searching along the ramparts of the eastern wall. The old redstone was warmed by the sun and shaded by the quiet green heights of Mossflower. She looked around distractedly.

"Baby Rollo, hush! We won't find anything with you singing aloud like that, it's very distracting."

Rollo gave her a winsome smile. He held a paw to his chubby face. "Ssshhhh, 'stracting!" he echoed.

Cornflower could not help laughing at the infant vole. "Go on with you, you rascal. Why don't you pop down and see Mr. Spike in the cellars and lend him a paw? He'll probably give you a drink of nice cold strawberry cordial."

Rollo sang lustily as he made his way down the wallsteps.

"Seeker Flounder inner stones,

I catch a rat an' break his bones.

Give Mr. Spike a good hard strike,

For good ol' strawhawhaw beherreeee corjulllUl!"

He tottered momentarily on the bottom step but was caught firmly by Winifred the Otter, who happened to be passing by in the nick of time.

"Gotcha, you villain. Oof! You're a great lump of a baby bankvole. Hi, Cornflower. No luck? I think we're all in the same boat. Come down off there. If s getting too hot to be searching now. Let's go and have lunch. They've put out a picnic spread on the grass."

As Cornflower and Winifred sat with their backs against the Abbey wall, they were joined by Foremole,

"Yurr, missis, oil just see'd li'l Rollyo agoin' off down't cellars, hurr hurr. Ambrose'11 be a-nappen. Due for a rude awaken, oi shouldn't wunner."

The meal was simple: fresh summer salad, cold cider, and gooseberry crumble with nutmeg cream. Foremole munched thoughtfully, wrinkling his snout and blinking his eyes a lot.

"Hurr, gotten uz proper flummoxed, 'as yon puzzle. Nor a one yet a cummen up wi' no dues."

Cornflower passed him the cider. "If s difficult, I agree, but we must find the solution soon if we are to help Matthias. If s hard to know where to begin. 'Seek the Founder in the stones where the little folk go.' Do we begin by seeking out the stones, the Founder, the little folk, or all three?"

Baby Rollo came running towards them with a small canteen of strawberry cordial tied about his fat waist. Winifred laughed. "Look out, here's the terror back again. I'll bet Mr. Spike gave him what he wanted just to be rid of him while he takes his nap."

They carried on eating and discussing the riddle. Baby Rollo sat between Cornflower and Foremole, continually butting in and trying to show them something he had in his paws. Winifred patted the baby vole's head.

"Yes, yes, very nice, Rollo. But please don't interrupt. Can't you see we're talking?"

Rollo would not be put off. He cut a comical figure,

muttering away as he wriggled his paws this way and that as if trying to hold on to something.

"Cornflow', lookit see, lookit," he persisted.

Cornflower fed him on a piece of gooseberry crumble and wiped his face on the corner of her apron. "Drink up your cordial like a good little vole now, Rollo. Please don't speak with your mouth full. Remember your manners. Oh dear, what is he so excited about?"

Rollo opened his paws wide, gurgling at the insect that ran backwards and forwards across them. "Lookit, li'l folkses!"

All three stared in amazement. The infant was showing them something they had not thought of so far.

"If s an ant!"

"Of course, the little folk. Thaf s what Methuselah and old Abbot Mortimer always called ants: the little folk/'

"Yurr, clever li'l Rollyo, guddbeast, young zurr!"

"Tell us where you found him."

Rollo pointed a paw with the ant still roaming across it. "Mista Spike's cellar,"

Across the lawn they hurried, into Great Hall, down the stairs to Cavern Hole, through the

small corridor at the far side and down the sloping ramp into the wine cellars. Ambrose Spike lay snoring gently, an empty jug beside him. At a nod from Foremole they tiptoed past the slumbering hedgehog and followed baby Rollo through the dim cellar. He led them to a tun barrel of preserved damsons, a huge old oaken affair which had stood there longer than any creature cared to remember. There was a crack between the staves where the withe had perished, causing a slight leak. Rollo pointed to the floor where a tiny pool of the dark sticky juice was congealing. Ants busily collected the sweet residue, trooping in a continuous column.

"Lookit, see, li'l folkses."

Cornflower dapped her paws in delight. "Good vole, Rollo. Come on, let's follow them and see where they

The procession of ants marched busily along, hugging the wall, deeper into the cellars, where they took a right turn/ following an old passage.

'Wait a moment/' Winifred said. "I'll go and get a torch. It's very dark in here."

They paused, watching the line of ants industriously plodding along, with other ants passing mem on their way back to the juice. Winifred returned, and the light from the blazing faggot torch she held aloft helped greatly.

They continued down the old passage, which twisted and turned, dry, dark and musty. The light revealed a heavy wooden door barring the way. The ants, however, marched straight on, under the space at the bottom of the door. Between them the others tugged on the tarnished brass ring handle. The door opened slowly, its iron hinges creaking rustity. This frightened the ants. They dispersed, breaking the continuous trail.

"Be still and quiet now, give the little folk time to settle," Cornflower advised.

They waited until the ants had forgotten the intrusion upon their line and continued progress.

They were in a small cavelike room, full of forgotten barrels, tools and old benches. The ants wove a tortuous path, around crumbling and broken casks, firkins and butts, across the room to another passage which was little more than an unpaved tunnel. With baby Rollo still leading, they crouched and followed. The going began to get steep.

"This looks like some kind of disused working, maybe a mistake in the digging plans of the foundations that was left abandoned," Cornflower remarked.

"Burr, could be, missus," Foremole called from the rear. "Oi b'aint been yurr afore. We'm a-goen uphill by moi reckernen. Oi spect they arnts knows where they be bound, tho."

Sometimes old roots got in their way. With often a boulder they had to climb over, their heads scraping the earthy roof above, both Cornflower and Winifred began

to wish for the sunny warmth of the afternoon above ground. Rollo was too excited to think of other things. He followed the line of ants eagerly. Foremole, who was used to the dark underground places, followed stolidly in the rear. They finally emerged into what was neither a room, passage or cave, it was a low, dim area supported by stone columns with a wall blocking the way at the far end. The torchlight showed the ants were climbing in between the mortared spaces of the lower courses, until three layers up they disappeared into a crack between two of the heavy redstone blocks.

Winifred went to the place and held the torch up. "Well, that's where they're going, but I'm afraid we'd have to be the same size as an ant to follow. Hello, what's this ... Look!"

Rollo and Cornflower rubbed dust and dry earth away from the surface of the larger of the sandstone blocks until lettering was revealed.

"Aha! It's the very foundation stone of Redwall Abbey. Let*s see what it says," Constance exclaimed. She urged Winifred to hold the light closer as she read aloud:

"Upon this stone rest all our hopes and efforts. Let Redwall Abbey stand for ever as a home for the peaceful and a haven for woodlanders. In the Spring of the Late Snowdrops this stone was laid in its place by our Champion, Martin the Warrior, and our Founder, Abbess Germaine. May our mnters be short, the springtimes green, our summers long and the autumns fruitful."

They stood in silence after Cornflower had read the beautiful inscription, the history and tradition of Red-wall laying its kindly paw on each of them.

Foremole broke the silence with his mole logic. "Aroight, you uns bide yurr awhoil, oi'll goo an' fetch ee diggen teams. This be a job fer mole skills."

When he had gone, they sat gazing at the stone in the dwindling torchlight. It was Winifred who voiced their thoughts.

"Whafll we find behind the wall, I wonder?"

The late afternoon sun shimmered and danced on the broad waters of a deep-flowing stream that ran through the rock-shelved floor of the canyon between two hills. Gratefully the chained captives drank their fill before lying down to rest on the sunbaked stone. Wedgeback the stoat sat nearby. He glared at them, pointing menacingly with his cane.

"Right, you lot, heads down, get a bit of sleep while you can. And just let me hear one move or murmur from any of you, by the fang! I'll have your tails for tea."

As the stoat moved off, he slipped on a wet patch of rock. Jumping up quickly, he wagged the cane again. "Remember what I said; eyes closed, lie still, and no chain-clanking, or you're for it!"

Most of the other prisoners stretched out so they could be alone, but Mattimeo and his friends huddled doˆe together. The young mouse lay with his head against Sam's tail, and as (hey rested they whispered quietly among themselves.

"Wonder if old Ambrose Spike's down in his cellar having a snooze among the barrels."

"Aye, d'you remember that day we sneaked down there and drank the strawberry cordial out of his barrels with hollow reeds?"

"Do I! Haha, good old Spike. Wish I had a beaker of mat cordial right now."

"Hmm, or a big apple and cinnamon pie with fresh cream poured over it, or maybe just some good fresh bread and cheese."

Auma gave the chain a slight tug. "Oh, go to steep, you lot, you're making me hungry. Right now I wish I had a bowl of my father's mountain foothill stew, full of leaks and potatoes with gravy and carrots and onions and"

"Huh, we're making you hungry? I thought your father was a warrior. They aren't usually good at cooking."

"No, but my father Orlando is, though he told me never to tell any creature in case they thought he was getting soft, but he always cooked wonderful things for me to eat. S'pose it was 'cos I never had a mother. Or at least I can't remember her."

There was silence as the young captives thought of their own parents. Mattimeo began to wish that he had never caused his father and mother any trouble. He looked down at his chains and resolved that if ever he got free and returned to Redwall he would be a good son.

"Matti, are you asleep?" Tess's urgent whisper broke into his thoughts.

"No, Tess. What is it?"

"I'll tell you, but you must keep calm. When Wedge-back slipped and fell, he lost his little dagger. You know, the one he always carries tucked in the back of his belt. I've got it."

Mattimeo tried to remain still, but his senses were alert. "Great! Well done, Tess. Do you think we can use it to open the locks of our chains?"

"Ssshh, not so loud. I'm sure of it. I've just opened mine. If s only a simple twirl lock and the dagger point works perfectly. Stay still, I'll get it to you."

Tim and the others had heard Tess.

"Good old Tess, this is the chance we've been waiting for!"

"We'll have to leave it for a bit. I can see the slavers lying down in the mouth of a cave over there. Wait for a while, until they're asleep."

Mattimeo felt Tess sliding the dagger slowly under his outstretched paw. He slipped it up his habit sleeve. Yawning loudly, he turned over and huddled up so he could inspect the weapon. It was a small double-edged blade that ran to a sharp point. Mattimeo inserted it into the keyhole of his paw manacles and twisted a few times. The simple mechanism gave a small dick and opened, and he had one paw free. It was only the work of a moment to open the other. He raised his head carefully

and looked over towards the guards, but they were not yet fully asleep.

" Auma, can you and Jube keep an eye on those guards and let me know when you think they're well asleep? Tim, I'm going to pass you the dagger. Work quietly, try not to rattle the chains."

"Mattuneo, if s all very well getting our chains unfastened, but there are seven of us, where will we go?" Tess worried. "Besides, I can't see seven escaping from here without some noise."

Mattuneo unfolded his plan. "Listen, all of you. There's only one way we can go, and ifs the best way: straight into the river. We can slide off the bank one by one. There must be an overhang, if these rocks are anything to go by. We hide underneath an overhang, maybe upriver, going south. Slagar will think we have tried to go in the other direction, towards home. Besides, we can't be tracked if we stay in the water. We must find somewhere to hide under the bank and stay there. When all the fuss dies down, they'll have to continue to where

they're going. When they're gone, then we can come out and make our way back to Redwall. Agreed?"

So it was agreed. The escape plan was to be carried out.

With Matthias's sword point at his throat and Orlando's axe resting delicately upon his tail, Scurl told the best story that his agile mind could think up.

"They be woodlanders. Scurl tried to helpem. Please be easy with your longblade, warrior mouse. 1 see Slagar and his villains with slaves, so I say to me, I must helpem, helpem. But no good, weasels drive me off, stoats, ferrets chase Scurl. I could not help woodlanders."

Matthias relaxed the sword point a fraction. "Where did you get all these things: robe rope, seasonday gift, tail bracelet, blue flowers? The creatures that gave them to you, three mice, a squirrel and a young badger, are they all alive?"

Scurl nodded vigorously. "Oyes oyes, woodlanders all alive. I throw food to them when Slagar not watching. They give me these and say. Tell others to follow us.'"

Oriando watched the crested newt. He did not like or trust the creature.

"Think carefully, lizard," the big badger said in a low, dangerous tone, "because if I think that you are lying, then you have seen your last sunset. Which way did they go?"

Scurl swallowed hard.

"S-south . . . Straight south." His voice was little more than a nervous whisper as he pointed the direction.

Oriando and Matthias looked to Jabez Stump. The hedgehog nodded.

"He speaks truth," he confirmed.

Jess Squirrel gathered up the possessions that her son and his friends had parted with, and stuffed them into her backpack. "I'll keep hold of these. If you've been telling the truth, you can have them back when we return this way. If you haven't, then we'll find you anyway and make you wish you'd never been born."

With Basil and Cheek in the lead, they strode off south through the woodlands, leaving behind them Scurl the frilled newt, who without a moment's hesitation started running north, hoping that the grim-faced searchers would never again cross his path.

Towards evening, the shadows began lengthening. Above the treetops, Oriando spotted twin hills.

'Tracks heading straight there, old lad," Basil said, reading his thoughts. "Betcher the jolly old young uns are somewhere up there right now, wot?"

Cheek had begun to adopt Basil's mannerisms. He struck a pose and tried hard to waggle his ears. "Oh, wot, wot. Definitely, old feller. Lef s jolly well follow the jolly, jolly old rascals, wot, wot?"

A hefty cuff from Orlando's blunt paw sent the impudent young otter head over tail. "Mind your

manners, waterdog. Don't make fun of your elders and betters."

Silently and with great care they approached the twin hills that reared from the forest floor in the failing tight. Matthias and Orlando with weapons drawn in the lead, Cheek rubbing his head as he followed up the rear with Basil.

Slagar's keen eye had picked them out. He lay on the summit of the hill, watching their progress, a cunning idea forming itself in his fertile mind.

Bageye, Skinpaw and Scringe watched the masked fox. They too had seen the searchers and were anxiously wondering what their leader would do about the warlike warriors who were getting closer by the moment. Slagar turned to them, his good eye glinting evilly from the mask as it sucked in and out with his excited panting.

"Right, here's the plan. Listen carefully now, I want no mistakes. Scringe, run down and tell Threeclaws and Halftail to march the prisoners into that cave at the foot of this hill. Make sure they leave plenty of tracks. Then march them straight out again, cover the tracks coming out and head them south at full speed. Bageye, Skinpaw, you come with me. We'll move further along this hilltop until we're above the cave. There's plenty of boulders and rocks lying about. We'll make a great heap on top of here, right above the cave."

Bageye and Skinpaw looked quizzically at Slagar, but they knew better than to ask questions, even if they did not understand. Slagar the Cruel gave orders to be obeyed, not questioned.

Slagar led them along the crest of the hill, giggling wickedly to himself. Tonight he would have all the fish in one net and his revenge would be complete. They would die slowly, oh so slowly!

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Late evening shades turned the stones of Redwall Abbey to a dull crimson, the last rays of the sun sending slender slivers of ruby and gold from behind a purple-blue cloudbank. Beneath the ground, Constance sat holding baby Rollo as they watched the Foremole and his team working expertly to remove the great foundation stone. They had bars, wedges and timber props, besides chisels and hauling ropes. The mole leader gave directions as he scuttled here and there surveying the job.

"You'm a-finisht chiselen thurr. Rooter?"

"Aye, that'll do et, zurr."

"Jarge, set they wedgin's in. Gaffer'n oi'll sloid these yurr greasy planks under. You'n Rooter set they ropes'n'ooks in't stone. Stay a-dear, missis, an' moind yon hinfant."

A large solid implement which the moles called a "gurtpaw" had been set up. It was a strange affair resembling a sideways block and tackle. The busy mole workbeasts attached the ropes to a big round treetrunk bobbin and began cranking a long stout beech handle. Baby Rollo gazed wide-eyed. He whispered to Winifred the Otter. "What they doin'r

"Hush now, littie un, and watch. See, the slack's bein' taken up on those ropes the more they work that handle."

Gradually the ropes tightened and began to creak and strain. The massive stone block moved a fraction, and its base was now resting on three flat well-greased sycamore planks. The moles began shouting in an even chant:

"Yurr she coom!

Hurr she doo!

Yurr she coom!

'eave, mole crew!"

The Founder's stone began sliding out of the place where it had been set long ages ago. It moved at an angle, leaving Foremole room to scurry in and jam two upright sections of green pine as props.

"Look Rollo, see, the big stone is moving!" Cornflower was almost dancing with excitement.

Ants dashed this way and that, stone ground against stone, rope hawsers creaked and groaned as the mole crew chanted their rock-moving song, with baby Rollo's gruff little voice singing in time with them. More props were brought up as the stone block slid ponderously forward, leaving a large square hole in the wall.

"Cease'n'alt, moles, the job be dun!" Foremole's announcement set his crew to leaning and panting against the gurtpaw, their tongues lolling out as they passed a canteen of cider from one to another. The mole leader stood to one side and bowed low.

'Thurr it be, gennelbeasts, take they torcher an' 'ave a gudd viewen insoides."

Smiling happily, Winifred and Cornflower congratulated the motes. "Well done, Foremote. Thank you, team, you did work hard. We could never have moved such a stone without you."

If a mole could have blushed, it would have been the Foremole. He and his crew stood about, awkwardly kicking the loose earth with their blunt digging paws.

"Hurr, bless ee, marm, it wurr a nuthin', glad to be o' survice."

With Cornflower in the lead, they made their way

through the hole. The torch was guttering low. Winifred bade them stand still. Moving around the walls, the otter found dried brushwood torches in rusting metal sconces. She touched each one with her own torch as she passed, and she soon had the whole place illuminated.

It was a large square rock chamber with an earthen floor. In one corner there was a massive anthill reaching halfway up the wall. They skirted it, taking care not to disturb the little folk. Cornflower's breath caught in her throat at the sight that confronted them. It was a beautiful redstone statue of a wise old mouse, sitting on a simple chair of wrought stone, one paw upraised, the other holding open a stone book which lay in her lap.

Winifred gazed at the kindly old face. It had a wrinkly smile, small square spectacles perched

on the end of its nose and drooping whiskers which gave it a homely look. "By the fur! She seems to be watchin' us. I wonder who she was?"

Cornflower instinctively knew. "Thaf s old Abbess Germaine, the designer of Redwall. I'm sure of it. She looks so peaceful and gentle sitting there."

Foremole brushed dusty earth from the base of the statue. "Lookit yurr!" he called.

In the flickering torchlights. Cornflower stooped to read the inscription carved on the base plinth:

"Germaine, first Abbess of Redwall. I came from home to find a home. The seasons were good to me. Here I will rest with the little folk."

Winifred nodded in admiration. "That's how it should be. She looks a nice old cove, sirtin' there with her specs an' her book."

Foremole mounted the base and ran heavy expert paws over the statue. "Creatur' oo carven this'n were a maister, mark moi word. It be a gurt piece o' work, hurr."

"Yes indeed," Cornflower agreed. "Look,there's even a

little stone ant crawling up the pages of the book. But what are we supposed to be looking for?"

Winifred shrugged. "Slowed if I know. Seems we've gone to a lot of trouble just to find a wonderfully carved statue. Very nice, but not much help."

They began searching the chamber carefully from earthen floor to stone ceiling, checking

each stone in the* walls without success.

"Ho hurnrrun!" Cornflower yawned. "I think we'd better leave it for tonight and come here again tomorrow. It must be late night now. Come on, baby Rollo, or we'll miss supper. Come down here, you little terror."

The infant bankvole had climbed up on the statue. He was sitting on the knee of the Abbess, alongside the stone book she held in her lap. Winifred went after him. He tried to wriggle away, but she caught him and lifted him off the statue's lap. As she did, Rollo grabbed at the replica of the tiny stone ant crawling upon the open pages of the book. Much to Winifred's annoyance, it came away in his paw.

"Naughty Rollo! Ooh, you little scallawag, you've broken the lovely statue."

Rollo held the stone ant up to show Winifred that he had not broken it. There was a copper pin beneath it which had been holding it in place upon a small hole drilled in the stone pages. "Not broke. Win, look."

"Moind ee, missis!" The team mole Gaffer pawed Cornflower swiftly to one side and threw himself flat at the foot of the statue. When baby Rollo had picked up the stone ant on the copper pin, something happened to the book which lay sloping downward from the lap of the Abbess Germaine.

The pages of the book, which looked for all the world like a solid slab cunningly carved to represent a block of pages, slipped. A thin section slid out from the block and fell towards the floor. Luckily, Gaffer had noticed it beginning to move, and the fragile tablet of stone landed on his soft furred back as he lay beneath the statue.

Fortunately it was not damaged. Patting him gratefully on the head, Cornflower reverently picked up the delicate tablet in both paws.

"Well saved. Gaffer! This is what we were looking for. Who would have thought it. A stone page from a stone book, covered in writing too!"

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2O

Auma lifted her head slightly and nodded to Mattimeo. "If s now. They've all dozed off. We must go, now!"

The dagger had been passed from paw to paw, and one by one the captive companions had freed themselves from the manacles. They looked towards Mattimeo, waiting upon his lead.

Willing himself to move carefully, the young mouse gripped the dagger blade between his teeth and summoned up all his courage. Rising slowly to a crouch, he edged forward along the sunwarmed stone of the river-bank, keeping a wary eye upon the sleeping slavers. Bit by agonizing bit, he crept along until he reached the water. Now he had to be extra careful not to make a splash that would waken their captors. Lowering himself gently into the smooth-flowing waters, Mattimeo caught his breath sharply as his body dipped deep below the warm surface into the cold undercurrent. Holding the rock ledge to keep from being swept away downstream, he nodded towards Sam.

The young squirrel stood boldly upright and moved straight into the water with a quiet confidence. He waved a paw at Cynthia Bankvole, who shuddered and huddled down against the rock, whining "I can't do it, we'll be caught and they'll beat us. I'm scared!"

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Mattimeo gritted his teeth against the dagger with impatience as he snarled against the blade. "Move, Cynthia, move! Come on, you're holding the rest back!"

Auma gave her a gentle shove, murmuring quietly. "Hurry now, there's a good little vole. You'll never see home again if you act frightened."

The mention of home set Cynthia's trembling paws in motion. She stood hurriedly, dashed forward, tripped on some loose manacles and fell headlong into the water with a splash. Mattimeo and Sam grabbed her, stifling her mouth with their paws to stop her screaming out

in panic. The escapers froze.

Vitch's eyelids flickered and a weasel lying by him grumbled in his sleep as he turned over. Auma let out a low sigh of relief. The peace had not been disturbed, the slavers slept on.

Tim and Jube went next, followed by Tess and Auma. The remaining slaves on the bank lay chained and asleep. None of them would have had the courage or nerve to attempt escaping; they had been captives far longer than Mattimeo and his friends, and they had seen Slagar deal with captured runners. It was not a pretty sight.

The escapers stood in the stream with the water lapping almost to their chins in the fading light. Mattimeo glanced up at the darkening sky gratefully. The twilight would aid them, and it would soon be night. Holding paws and staying close to the bank, the friends pushed their way upstream to the south. It was heavy going. The surface of the river was deceptively calm, belying the cold, tugging undercurrent. Wet habits weighted down by water soon made it even harder for the Redwallers, and they were grateful when Mattimeo pointed to an overhanging rock ledge. He pressed forward, moving slower because of the depth, and behind him he could hear his friends breathing hard through their nostrils as they followed in his wake.

The rocky overhang was an ideal hiding place. They chose a spot where silverweed and purple loosestrife bloomed thick, drooping over the soil-topped rock ledge

to mingle with arrowhead growing from the shallows. It provided a perfect curtain. Crouching low at the rear of the underhang, they nodded silent congratulations to each other.

Back along the bank, all hell suddenly broke loose with the return of Scringe.

"Come on, you lazy lot, up on your paws. Slagar says you've got to Hey! Look at these loose chains! Halftail, Threedaws, raise the alarm! There's been an escape!"

"Escape! Escape! The prisoners have escaped. Search every nook and cranny, they can't have gone far. Escape! Escape!"

Browntooth ran slapbang into Threeclaws. The weasel held the tender end of his smarting nose as he glared at the stoat, who sat on the ground rubbing his head. "On your paws,

clumsydod. Get searching, hurry!"

"On, er, righto. Which prisoners are we searching for?"

Scringe had been checking the slave lines. He grinned wickedly. "That Redwall lot, the female badger and the young hedgehog. Hoho, I wouldn't like to be in your fur when Slagar gets back."

"Oh no, not the Redwallers." Halftail groaned. "Slagar'll have our guts for garters if that lot have gone missing, 'specially you, matey. You're supposed to be in charge."

Threeclaws held his throbbing nose indignantly. "Who, me? Not the way I heard it, bucko. You're the one who always wants to be boss when he's away."

Vitch ran about waving his paws. "Oh, stop arguing, you blockheads. Let's find them, or he'll flay the lot of us alive."

Scringe stuck out his paw and tripped Vitch neatly. "Watch who you're calling blockhead, dribblenose. I can see I'll have to take charge here after the mess you lot have made. Wedgeback, Badrag, go back the way we came. No need to go further than that big hill. Slagar would have spotted them if they'd got that far. Halftail, Damper, search up ahead. The rest of you look around

here, under rocks, behind bushes, anywhere they might be hiding. Vitch, Browntooth, into the water and search that river!"

Vitch stood his ground defiantly. "Huh, who are you to be giving orders? I'm not going into any rotten old river. Who can tell how deep it is? Besides, if s nearly dark and there might be a pike in there or something. Ouch!"

Threeclaws stood brandishing the willow cane he had laid across Vitch's back. "Do as he says. Get in that river, snivelwhiskers, and you, Browntooth, or I'll tie you in a sack with rocks and

toss you in there myself."

With a fine show of moody bad temper, Vitch began lowering himself gingerly into the water, followed by a resigned Browntooth.

"Yah! I suppose we'll have to do it if the rest of you are too scared to get your paws wet." The undersized rat muttered aloud.

Scringe grabbed a passing weasel. "Scared? Who's scared? Me and Skinpaw wiD search downstream, you and Browntooth look upstream, and we'll show you just who's scared, won't we, mate?"

Skinpaw looked decidedly unhappy but tried to put a bold face on. "Ha, we certainly will. . . . You go first, Scringey."

Underneath the rock ledge upstream, Tim Churchmouse heard every word. He turned to Mattimeo. "Whatare we going to do, they're searching the river?"

Tess plucked a hollow reed and bit the end off it. "Look, remember we lay under the Abbey pond breathing through reeds like this last summer when Constance was looking for us?"

Mattimeo pulled a reed and bit the end. "Oh yes, wasn't that the time you cut up one of Friar Hugo's best tablecloths to make a tent?"

Sam Squirrel blew through a reed to test it. "If I remember rightly, that was you, Matti. No time to argue, though. Let's give it a try."

Holding on to each other and the rocks on the

riverbed, they submerged, dosing their nostrils and using their mouths to breathe through the hollow reeds. It worked perfectly.

Vitch dung tightly to Browntooth in the center of the river as they waded neck-high against the flowing current. It was cold and deep. Browntooth shook (he rat away from him.

"Gerroff! What are you tryin' to do, drown me? Go and search that side of the bank, I'll take a look at the other side. They couldn't hide in the middle of a river. Look, let go, will you, or we'll both be swept away."

"Huh, you're not soft, are you, baggybelly? This side is full of overgrown ledges, and your side is nice smooth bank. Well, you can nibble your daws, fattie. I'm not going, so there!"

Browntooth forded his way toward the smooth bank. "Do what you like, runt. When Slagar gets back I'll tell him that you wouldn't search the river properly, and we'll see what he has to say about that."

"Snitch, telltale, gabbygob!" Vitch waded over towards the ledge, calling back insults.

Mattimeo could dimly make out the raf s paws through the debris Vitch was churning up from the riverbed as he waded. The young mouse held his breath as the paws came slowly doser. Another few steps and he would tread on Auma's back. The badger huddled with the water waving through her coat, unaware of the impending danger as her eyes were shut tight. Mattimeo made a sudden decision. It was risky, but worth a try.

He struck out swiftly at the raf s paw with the small dagger.

"Yawchooch, glubglub. Help!" Vitch thrashed about in the water, losing his balance as he tried to dutch his injured paw. Swallowing water, he floundered about for a moment. Then, galvanized by pure terror, he grabbed

the overhanging plants and scrambling furiously hauled himself over the rock ledge up on to

the bank.

"Aargghh! Browntooth, don't go near that ledge, mate. There's a big pike under there. Look, it bit me. Owowowow!" Vitch rocked back and forth, trying to staunch the flow of blood by stuffing the injured paw into his mouth.

Browntooth waded hastily across. Avoiding the ledge, he found a part of the bank where he could easily get out of the river.

"Well, they won't be under there, or anywhere up this end, if there's pike in the water. Are you sure it was a pike, mate? Maybe it was one of those giant eels with poison teeth. I shouldn't suck it, if I were you."

Vitch spat out hurriedly and rubbed his mouth hard, forgetting the stabbed paw in his panic. "Splurr! Yurgh! Whaf 111 do, supposing that I've swallowed some?"

Browntooth lay flat on the rocky ledge, trying to peer over and get a glimpse of the monster. "Oh, you'll soon know, if you turn purple and green and start s wellin' up. That'll put a stop to your impudence, eh?"

Beneath the ledge, Auma could take it no more. The air " from thestraw was not enough for her, and she broke the surface, blowing hard and sucking in breath. "Whooaar!"

Browntooth leapt backwards. Regaining his paws, he trotted off to join the rat.

"Cor, did you hear that, Vitchey? You're lucky you weren't eaten alive. It sounded like one of those giant things they talk about that lives in the bluesea place. Hoho, I'm not stopping round here."

Mattimeo and the others broke the surface beneath the ledge. Gulping air gratefully, they listened to the cries of the rat and the stoat receding down the bank.

"Maybe I won't turn purple and green, maybe it was just a sharp rock."

"Are you kiddin', bucko? I never heard a rock sound like that."

"Then it must have been a pike. They don't have poison teeth, do they?"

"I wouldn't know, I've never been bitten by one. Hew d'you feel?"

"I feel all right, 'cept for my paw. Ooh, it really stings and it won't stop bleedin'. Look."

Cold and numb as they were, the comrades beneath the ledge tried to stifle suppressed giggles.

Scringe had the remaining captives chained and ready to march. He shrugged in resignation.

"Well, if they can't be found, then they can't. So much the worse for us when the boss finds out. Right, lef s march them into that cave over there, men out again and continue south. Wedgeback and Badrag, you cover the tracks coming out, but leave the ones going in."

"Hmph! Sounds a bit silly, whaf ve we got to do that for?" Badrag grumbled.

"Because that's what Slagar ordered, numbskull. Now get moving."

Darkness had fallen when Matthias and his search party reached the foothills of the gorge. Orlando looked about in the still night, brandishing his axe.

"I don't like it, Matthias," the badger remarked.

"Neither do I, friend, but we've got to take the chance. We can't afford to wait until dawn. They may know we're following and have pushed on ahead."

Basil Stag Hare pulled Cheek back as he tried to bound forward. "I agree with you, old scout. Got to take the chance, wot? Faint heart never found fair young uns."

"Then we'd best stick f gether in case of a trap," Jabez Stump cautioned.

Jess Squirrel chattered her teeth angrily. "Trap! Ill give them trap if I lay paws on the filthy scum."

Matthias silenced them with a wave of his sword. "Keep your voices down, sound echoes in a place like

this. We'll push forward fast and see if we can't spring our own ambush, but Jabez is right, stay together."

A half-moon threw its pale light down into the hilly canyon, making eerie shadows as it played with the breeze stirring the stunted trees that grew amid the rocky foothills. Matthias marched silently in the lead, the fur at me back of his neck rising stiffly with the feeling of hidden danger. Orlando dropped to the rear and walked with a sideways shuffle, checking behind them as he gripped his huge war axe low on its haft, ready to swing Eke a deadly scythe at any back stabbers.

Perched high on the tor of the hill beside a large mound of rocky rubble, Slagar whispered to Bageye, "Where are they now? Can you see them?"

Tiie stoat nodded. "I can make out the shape of their group. They've entered the canyon now. See, by those juniper bushes, and they're heading this way."

The Cruel One pulled the eyeslits of the silken hood wide around his eyes. "Ah yes, thaf s our little friends, all right. Now keep perfectly still and have those poles ready to paw. When I give the order, follow my lead."

Skinpaw crouched behind Slagar with his paw resting on the long pole that was lodged beneath the rocky pile.

Without looking back, Slagar hissed. "Get your scurvy paw off that pole, you idiot. I don't want even a speck of dust to fall and betray our position."

The weasel withdrew his paw swiftly.

Down in the canyon, Cheek made a bound forward. Jess grabbed him by the tail. "Where are you off to, little waterdog?" "It's a river. See the moonlight glinting off it? Lemme

g-" Basil wagged an admonitory ear at the garrulous otter.

"Steady in the ranks there, young Cheek. This is no time to go swimmin'. Where d'you think you are, at an otters' divin' gala?" Jabez cast around by the river's edge. "They camped

here, for sure. See, some of the damp pawmarks are still visible. Now, lef s see where they'd be movin' from here." The untidy hedgehog rummaged about, snuffling and grunting quietly. "There! Yonder cave is the perfect place to stay the night."

Matthias peered at the dark cave entrance silhouetted against the lighter hillside scree in the thin moonlight.

"You're right, Jabez. The good thing about it is it looks as if there's only one way in or out. We'll get as close as we can, then rush it. Be careful how you strike in there, we don't want to injure any young ones. Cheek, you could come in useful there. Do you think you could get the captives out of the cave, away from the battle?"

The otter withdrew his tail from Jess's paw and gave a salute. "Of course, I promise you they'll be safe, Matthias."

Basil nudged Orlando. "Very good, top-note, wot? Our Cheek shaped up like a proper warrior to that. I knew in me heart there was somethin' good about that young rip. I was right, give him somethin' positive f do an' he turns up trumps. Mentioned in dispatches, Cheek, m'laddo!"

Orlando turned to Matthias, his eyes beginning to glint red. "The masked fox is mine, warrior/'

"Only if you find him first, friend."

"Agreed. What are we waiting for?"

"Not a thing. Lef s go!"

The great sword of Redwall and the battleaxe of the Western Plain swung aloft like twin cold fires in the moongleam.

"Redwaaaaaallllll!"

"Eulaliaaaaa!"

"Mossflowerrrrrr, give 'em blood'n'vinegar!"

Three things happened at once.

The searchers' war party thundered into the cave, swinging and yelling.

Seven fugitive heads popped up out of the water at the sounds of their parents and friends.

Three pairs of enemy paws heaved the poles upwards, sending a landslide of earth, rock, scree and soil hurtling downwards over the mouth of the cave.

21

Beeswax candles glimmered late in Cavern Hole.

Cornflower, Winifred, Foremole and baby Rollo sat at table with the Abbot and Constance. The slim stone tablet lay on a folded towel to prevent any damage.

Over a supper of mushroom soup, apple and celery-sKce, hazelnut bread and hotspice herb beverage, Cornflower had related the strange tale, not forgetting the part baby Rollo had played.

Abbot Mordalfus shook his head in wonderment. "Marvelous! You found the tomb of our Founder, Abbess Germaine, thanks to baby Rollo. Sometimes the gift of an inquisitive nature to the young can be greater than that of the wisdom which comes of age. I trust you put the stone back when you left."

Foremole tugged his snout respectfully. "Hurr, 'deed oi did zurr, she'm all shut in again naow."

"Pity, I'd have loved to see it, just once," Mordalfus sighed.

Constance indicated the tablet with an impatient paw. "Please, can we get on with this? What does the writing say on the stone?"

Winifred threw up her paws in despair. "It says nothing, blow me sails! There's only a lot of funny scratches on it."

The Abbot studied the strange marks, focusing through the small square spectacles perched on the end of his nose. "Wonderful! Amazing! A perfect example of ancient Loamscript." *

Constance scratched her headstripes. "Loamscript, what in the name of fur and feathers is Loamscript?"

'Tut, tut, Constance/' Mordalfus said, without taking his eyes from the stone tablet. "I see you have forgotten all the history lessons you learned as a young one. Who was your teacher and what were you told about the beginning of Redwall history?"

Constance frowned. She drummed paws on the table-top and looked at die ceiling for inspiration. It was not too long in coming. "Er, er, it was Sister Garnet. No, it was Methuselah. Ah yes, good old Brother Methuselah. Haha, he used to look at me over die top of his glasses just the way you do, Abbot. I remember he often tweaked my whiskers if I dozed off on a sunny afternoon at lessons in the orchard. Ah, but that was more seasons ago man I care to remember."

The Abbot smiled fondly at Constance. "Then let me refresh your memory, you dozy badger. Redwall Abbey was founded after the war of the wildcats by Martin the Warrior, who came from the northlands, and Abbess Germaine, who travelled with a band of woodland mice from a place called Loamhedge. Apparently they were driven from there by some sort of plague. Old Methuselah had a book written by one of Germaine's followers in Loamscript. Now, as I remember there was only one other creature who was clever enough to learn Loam-script from Methuselah. A tittle churchmouse named John. . . ."

Cornflower sprang up. "What? You mean John Churchmouse, our recorder?"

The Abbot folded his spectacles away into his wide sleeve, chuckling. "The very same! Cornflower, do you think you could go and rouse him?"

Winifred picked up the snoring form of baby Rollo

from his chair. "I'll come with you," the otter volunteered. "It's time this bundle o'-mischief was tucked away for the night." They hurried off to the dormitories.

John Churchmouse came down with Cornflower and Winifred. He nodded almost apologetically to those around the table.

"Couldn't sleep, /see, 1 don't sleep much these nights, thinking of my Tess and Tim and wondering if Matthias and the others have found them yet."

Mordalfus slid the tablet across to him. "Sit down, John. Here's something that may help to bring your young ones back. It's written in Loamscript. Can you read it?"

John stroked his whiskers. "Well, ifs a long time since I read any Loamscript. Many, many seasons ago. Haha, that was when Methusaleh used to tell me about this sleepy young badger in his dass, what was her name now . . , ?"

Constance tapped the table with a blunt paw. "Never mind, prize scholar. Get on with it."

John winked at Cornflower. "Righto, I'll give it a try. Could I borrow your glasses, please. Father Abbot? I left mine by the bedside."

With the Abbot's spectacles perched upon his nose, the churchmouse picked up the stone tablet and moved a candle nearer to help him. His lips moved silently and he stroked his whiskers a lot. Sometimes shaking his head or nodding it knowingly, he traced the strange-shaped writing. Finally he placed the tablet down on the table. Cupping his chin in his paws, he stared dreamily off into space.

Five voices inquired aloud with impatience, "Well?"

"Oh, ah, yes. Sorry, funny how it all comes back to you, isn't it? HKyou know, when I first looked at the stone ft didn't mean a thing to me, it might well have been written in butterflyese. Then suddenly it was clear as a stream in spring."

The Abbot leaned forward until his nose was near touching that of the churchmouse. "John, you can be a singularly annoying creature at times. Would you please read us the translation. Now!"

Immediately, John adjusted the glasses, coughed and began reading.

"Through the seasons, here I lie, 'neath this Redwall that we made. Solve the mystery, you must try, Graven deep it will not fade. Somewhere 'twixt our earth and sky. Birds and gentle breezes roam. There a key you might espy. To that place I once called home. Take this graven page and seek What my words in stone could mean What can't fly, yet has a beak, Mixed up letters evergreen. Two Bees, two Ohs One Sea, one tap. And weary without A. Leave me now to my long rest, Good fortune on your way."

Around the table they sat in silence, awed at the beauty and mystery of the ancient verse, until Cornflower shifted her chair noisily and destroyed the mood.

"Thank you, Mr. Churchmouse. Very pretty, I'm sure, but what does it all mean?"

Constance rubbed her weary eyes. "It means we've got a long complicated riddle to solve. Not tonight, though. I'm all for sleeping at this late hour."

John Churchmouse returned the Abbof s spectacles. "I'll second that. If s all very exciting, but I think we'd best sleep on it. Tomorrow morning will bring dear minds with a fresh approach."

The Abbot rose slowly, stretching and yawning.

"Tomorrow morning, then, out in the orchard where there's sun and shade. Goodnight, all."

After they had gone, Cornflower remained sitting at the table with the stone tablet in front of her. Carefully she turned it this way and that, studying the curious Loamscript, tracing it carefully with her paw. Some secret instinct deep inside her said that there was more to the thin stone slab than John had discovered in the writing. But what?

22

A massive slide of earth, soil, shale and scree mixed with huge boulders that had torn away a section of the hillside from top to bottom lay squarely across the cave entrance, trapping Matthias and his friends tight inside the cavern.

On top of the hill, Slagar and his cohorts were surprised and shaken by the scale of the landslide they had caused. Clouds of choking dust arose in the silvery moonlight around them. Bageye and Skinpaw buried their faces against the earth, scared to move. The masked fox lifted the bottom of the hood and spat gritty dust. He was about to howl his triumph at the night sky when Mattimeo and the escaped captives heaved themselves from the water and dashed towards the mound of debris with shouts of dismay.

Slagar grabbed Bageye and Skinpaw by their tails and dragged them swiftly back, down the opposite side of the hill.

"Ow! Ouch! Leggo, Chief!"

"Arrgh! Yer pullin' me tail off!"

The Cruel One cuffed them soundly about the ears. "Silence, idiots! Where did they come from?"

"Where did who come from?"

"Mattimeo and his lot. They're down there now, trying

to unblock the cave entrance."

"I never saw 'em. Chief."

"You wouldn't, muckbrain. You and your crony were too busy kissing the ground."

"They musf ve escaped. We'll go down there and round mem up, eh. Chief."

"Blockhead, there's not enough of us to capture 'em all. They'd scatter away like a shot. How could three of us catch seven of them, idiot! Listen, I'll stay here and keep an eye on mem, you two get running and catch up with the others. Tell Threedaws and Halftail to chain the rest of the prisoners up and stay with 'em, men bring the rest back here. Do it quietly, and we'll surround our little friends down there so none of them will escape a second time."

"Righto, but what if they manage to dig their friends out of that cave while we're away?"

"Don't talk rubbish," Slagar sniggered. "Nothing on earth could move that lot. It isn't a cave any more, if s a grave. Now get going and bring the rest back here quickly. When you get back, lie low, stay silent, and wait until I gˆve the signal."

Bageye and Skinpaw trotted off into the moonlit forest.

Slagar ripped off his patterned silk headmask and breathed deep, his mutilated face twisting into an insane smile as he listened to the young ones on the other side of the hill trying desperately to reach their parents and friends through an impenetrable mass of earth and

rock.

Inside the cave the dust had settled. Matthias felt about in the inky blackness until he found his sword. All around him there was spluttering, coughing and con-rusion. The warrior mouse wiped dusty earth from his mouth and called out, "Is everybeast all right?"

"All right? Steady on, old sport. A feller can hardly be all right when he's buried up to his middle in rocks and whatnot."

The warrior mouse groped about slowly in the dense

gloom. "Stay where you are, Basil. Don't move. We'll get you free. Now, are the rest of you safe and unharmed?"

"I'd be all right if this hedgehog didn't keep a bumpin' into me"

Cheek the otter's grumbling was cut short by Orlando's rumbling growl. "Then stay still and stop bobbing about. You've run into me twice. Here, whose bushy tail is this?"

"Mmmmm, ooohhh! What hit me?"

Matthias moved to where the voice came from. "Jess, are you all right?"

"I think so. A great slab of something got me from behind. No damage done, though. It just knocked me flat for a moment or two. What happened?"

"Kaaachoo!" Jabez Stump sneezed. "I don't think this hillside would stand still for ages then suddenly decide to slide one night for no good reason. Seems to me as if we've been lured into here and trapped."

Matthias and Ortando had crawled over to where Basil lay buried and were trying to dig him out. The old hare bore up bravely, helping them where he could.

"I think you're right, Stump old lad. Ha, here's a pretty thing, a bunch of seasoned campaigners caught like shrimp in a barrel, wot? I'll bet a salad to a soupbowl it was old slyboots, the masked thingummy. What d'you say, Matthias?"

'1 say keep still, Basil. Orlando, can you put your back to this rock and push it away from him? One of you grab his paws and start pulling while I dig the loose stuff away."

Cheek sprang forward and tugged Basil's paws with gusto. "Heave ho, old Sir Hare. Out you come, now."

"Yaggh! Beastly young blighter, you're standin' on me ear!"

Orlando put his strong back against the rock that was trapping Basil. He gave a mighty grunt as he threw his weight against it. "Grrumph! That's it. Hurry now, I can't hold this much longer."

Jabez and Jess helped Cheek. As Matthias dug furiously, they gave a good long heave. Basil popped out like a cork. The big badger let the rock go. There was another cloud of dust and a rattling of pebbles as the heap of hillside rubble settled.

Basil stamped his paws experimentally. "Bit stiff an' all that. Still workin' hunky dory, though. Well, what a load of old ninnies we are, eh, lettin' ourselves get bamboozled like that."

"Lef s not start blaming ourselves," Matthias cut in sharply. "What we did seemed a good idea at the time. The thing now is, how do we get out of this fix? Has any creature got flint or tinder to make light?"

Jess Squirrel wiped a paw across her brow. "Not a very good idea, Matthias. Haven't you noticed if s getting quite warm in here? That means we're using up the air. If we start making fire we'll use it up double quick and suffocate."

Orlando slumped back against the cave wall. "You're right, Jess. Those slavers meant this to be our tomb and they've done a good job of it, worse luck. Give me a moment or two to rest, then I'll see if there's any possibility of digging our way out, or at least making a small hole so that fresh air can come in."

"If s this dark I can't stand, not bein' able to see anything, all hot an' covered in dusty muck with a whole hillside on top of us. I can't even see me paw in front of my eyes!" Cheek's voice sounded close to panic.

Basil patted him firmly. "Now men, young otter m'lad, chin up. There's nothin' to get in a funk over. When I was with the border patrol we were in lots of tighter places than this one, wot? Never say die, Cheek, Ha! I'll betcha we'll be out of here before the night's over. Don't worry young waterdog, you'll be wallopin' about in the river by tomorrow night."

Cheek sat close to Basil and waited while Jess and Orlando took first shift to dig a way out of the landslide.

Around the friends the air seemed to grow darker and heavier as they lay trapped in the bowels of the hill.

On the outside, Mattimeo scrabbled furiously at the loose shale and earth, alongside Auma. The others dodged around the heap, trying to find a likely spot to dig. Auma grunted and strained as she tried to dislodge a huge boulder.

"It was my father, Orlando the Axe," she told Mattimeo. "I'd know his battle cry anywhere. Oh, please let him be all right."

Mattimeo stopped digging for a moment as he watched the loose earth slide swiftly in to take the place of the boulder Auma was moving.

"I saw my father, and heard him too. Even in the night, I think I recognized Jess and Basil, There were a few others too, but it was all over too fast to see who they were. Bah! We're getting nowhere like this. Look, every time you dig out a bit, the earth slides in and fills the gap again."

Cynthia Bankvole sat down and let the loose earth run through her paws. "It's no use, what can we do against all this? It would take ten teams of moles a full season to move all this earth, and some of these boulders look as big as a cottage."

Sam Squirrel shouldered her roughly aside. "Doesn't matter. My mum's in there, so we've got to keep trying. Come on, Cynthia, up on your paws and get digging."

"Jube, look about for a big branch or something I can use as a lever against these rocks," Auma called out. "How are you doing, Matti?"

Mattimeo straightened up. "Not very well. I suggest we all dig in the one spot."

Tess came hurrying over. "Look, I've found some flat slatey pieces. They'll do to dig with."

Dawn's first light glimmered in the east, a soft rosy glow dispersing the night from the deep greenery of Moss-164

flower Woods. The sun rose steadily, drying the dew from leaf and flower as the young woodlanders dug wearily in the shifting mass of debris.

Slagar lay on top of the gorge, watching them as he murmured, "Keep digging, my little slaves. Tire yourselves out so that you won't run and dodge. I can see my slavers threading their way through the forest yonder. They'll soon be here. Dig away, you young fools. You'll never see your friends or parents again."

In the summer peace of the beautiful old Redwall Abbey orchard, a group of creatures sat taking alfresco breakfast among the fruit trees. Abbot Mordalfus presided.

"Let us put our minds together, friends. If we wish to help Matthias and our young ones, we must solve the riddle of this poem." The Abbot tapped the stone tablet. "Where does the poetry end and the dues begin?"

John Churchmouse put down his bowl of mint tea and placed his paw in a very certain manner between two lines of verse.

"Right there, I'm sure of it. Listen:

'Through the seasons here 1 lie, 'neath this Redwall that we made. Solve the mystery, you must try. . . .'"

John tapped his paw down decisively. "There, right there. I couldn't sleep for thinking about it. Here's where the real clues begin:

'Graven deep it will not fade. Somewhere 'twixt our earth and sky, Birds and gentle breezes roam. There's a key you might espy, To that place I once allied home.'"

The Abbot toyed with a slice of apple. "I think you're right, John. In fact, part of the answer leapt out at me as you recited those words. It was the line that went: To that place I once called home.' Right, if this was written by old Abbess Germaine, then the place that she called home before she built Redwall was Loamhedge. However, that was all so far away and long ago in our history that the location of Loamhedge had been forgotten long before my time and that of many Abbots and Abbesses before me."

John nodded agreement. "Of course, old Loamhedge. That must be the place where the fox is taking our young ones, there or somewhere in the Loamhedge area. I can recall asking Brother Methuselah where Loamhedge was, but even he didn't know. How are we supposed to find it?"

Cornflower pointed at the stone tablet. "Obviously the answer is in the rhyme, because it says: Take this graven page and seek. What my words in stone could mean.' Surely that's a start."

"Burr, 'scuse me rnarm, oi thinks it be afore that, even: 'Somewhere 'twixt our earth'n'sky, burds an' gentle breezes roam.' Whurrs that?"

"Thafs where we might espy the key, accordin' to that there," Ambrose Spike chuckled. "Best look about for a key floatin' round in midair. Silly, I calls it."

John looked severely over the top of his glasses. "Silly it may sound, but it's a serious business, Spike."

"No need to get huffy, dear," Mrs. Churchmouse interrupted hastily. "Lef s all look up and see what we discover between earth and sky."

Winifred Otter summed it up in a word, "Treetops."

They sat looking at the treetops. Mrs. Churchmouse was just beginning to regret her foolish idea when Cornflower said, "The top of our Abbey, maybe?"

A slow smile spread across the Abbot's face. "Very clever. Cornflower. What better place for our Founder to leave a due than at the top of the very building she

designed. So, I'm looking up at our Abbey. Tell me, somebeast, what am T looking for?"

The answers came back.

"Something graven deep?"

"Words in stone?"

"Something that can't fly but has a beak?"

"How about mixed-up letters evergreen?"

"Two Bees and two Ohs?"

"What does an Oh look like?"

"Well, I know what two bees would look like."

John Churchmouse banged his beaker upon a wooden platter. "Quiet! Quiet, please! All this shouting is getting us nowhere. Cornflower, will you kindly stop baby Rollo playing with that stone tablet!"

Cornflower sat upon the grass with Rollo, who was running his paws over the slim stone.

Mrs. Churchmouse tried to pacify her husband. "Don't shout, dear. I'm sure Rollo won't harm it."

Cornflower was shaking with silent laughter. John was not amused. "I'm sorry, but I fail to see what's so funny about it, Cornflower."

"I'm not laughing at you, John, I'm laughing at baby Rollo. Here we are puzzling our brains out and Rollo has found the answer again."

"Where?"

"Right here on this stone," Cornflower explained. "Come and look. I didn't notice it until I watched Rollo passing his paws over the writing. Watch him, you'll see he stops his paw every time he finds a letter in green."

The Abbot hurried over to watch Rollo. "By the fur, you're right, Cornflower. Good baby, Rollo. Mixed up letters evergreen. Come on, little one, show me. Your eyes are better than mine. John, get that charcoal and parchment. Take the letters down as I call them out to you."

Obligingly Rollo began dabbing at various letters with his chubby little paw. Mordalfus relayed them to John Churchmouse. "First one letter B, second one letter B."

Ambrose Spike scratched his snout. "Will somebeast

tell me what in the name of acorns is going on here? Two green bees, letters graven in stone, I always thought bees were yellow and brown."

The Abbot looked skyward patiently. "Come here. Ambrose, let me show you. Look at the poem. Can you see that certain letters have been filled in with green vegetable dye? Right. I've just given John the first two. They are letter Bs not actual bees. See, here are more green letters."

It was still all a bit above Ambrose. He stared at the letters, shook his head and trundled off. "Huh, I've got work to attend to in the cellar. I can't hang about playin' word games. You can't drink stone messages, but good October ale, thafs a different matter. You lofd look sick without my casks of berry wine, mark my words!"

John Churchmouse glared over the top of his glasses at tile retreating cellar keeper.

"Now, where were we? Two letter Bs. Whaf s next, Abbot?"

'Two letter Os, John. Wait, I think RoHo has found more. Yes, there's a letter C. Well done, young un. Any more?"

Baby Rollo was enjoying himself. He waved his paw dramatically, stabbing it down as the Abbot called out the letters he indicated. "Take these down, John. T, A, P, W, E, R, and a letter Y. There I've translated the old letters pretty well. Is that the lot, Rollo?"

The infant waved to them and pursued Ambrose to the Wine cellar.

"Aye, thafs it," Cornflower chuckled. "What have we got, John?"

"B, B, O, O, C, T, A, P, W, E, R, Y. Twelve letters in all, though they're fairly well jumbled. I can't make head nor tail of it. Why couldn't Abbess Germaine have written What she meant dearly?"

The Abbot stood up and stretched. "Because then it Would not have been a secret. Those letters are the key. Once we get them in the right order, we'll know what the next move is to be."

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In the darkness of the cave, Orlando choked and coughed as he sought wearily about until his paw touched Matthias.

"Listen, friend," Orlando said, keeping his voice low so that the others would not hear, "I don't know how much rubble has fallen across this cave mouth, but I think we both know if s far too much for us to move. We're becoming weaker, Matthias. The air is running out in here. I keep feeling dizzy and wanting to lie down to sleep."

Matthias clasped the big badger's paw. "Same here, Orlando. But don't let the others know. Young Cheek will only panic and Basil will start jumping about trying to dunk up schemes to get us out. I know it's hard, but we'll just have to sit here and try not to fall asleep."

"Do you think there's anybeast outside?"

"The only ones I can think of are Slagar and his gang. We'd be in no condition to fight them, even supposing we could get out."

"I wish we had a strong mole with us."

"Aye, and if wishes were fishes there'd be no room in the river for water."

"I'm sorry, Matthias. I was only thinking aloud."

"Pay no heed to me, Orlando. It's this terrible darkness, the heat and the lack of air"

"And this confounded dust in me ears, laddie budd"

"Basil! You were listening to us."

"Say no more, old lad, say no more. Backs to the wall and all that, I say, I don't suppose anyone's got a bite to eat stowed on 'em?"

Even young Cheek managed a faint laugh. 'Trust you to think of food at a time like this, mate."

"Sony, Basil, we left the supplies outside so they wouldn't hamper us in the ambush," Jess Squirrel called from the far side of the cave.

Jabez Stump yawned. "Some ambush, eh? We've got ourselves rightly scuttled, you mark my spikes. Best thing is to sit quiet, think hard and breathe light."

A gloomy silence fell as they acted on the hedgehog's good advice.

Mattimeo dug and scrabbled wildly at the huge ever moving landslide. The sun was reaching its zenith and the digging was becoming more heated and futile. Grunting with exertion, he straightened up and passed a paw across his brow as a pile of loose earth rattled around his ears. Mattimeo's quick temper snapped. He seized a pawful of pebbles and flung them at Tim, who was digging higher up the pile.

"By the fur! Can't you stop loading muck down on top of me every chance you get?" Mattimeo grumbled.

Tim straightened up. "Sony."

"Sony's not good enough," Mattimeo snorted. "Just watch where you're chucking that stuff, will you!"

Tess passed Mattimeo a broad leaf containing water she had scooped from the stream. "Here, drink this and cool down. We'll get nowhere yelling at each other."

Mattimeo dashed the leaf from her paw, his face livid with anger. "It's all right for you to talk, your father isn't buried in there, is he? Where in the name of the claw has that hedgehog got to? It's going to take him half a season to find a branch so we can lever these rocks out"

"Over here, little hero. We've got your friends over here!"

Bageye and Skinpaw had Jube and Cynthia tied by their necks on a rope.

Still flushed with temper, Mattimeo grabbed a chunk of rock. "Come on Auma, Sam, lef s charge them!"

They had reached the lower edge of the rubble when Slagar's voice rang out mockingly behind them, "My, my, aren't we the bold ones? Go ahead, try it."

Mattimeo whirled about to face Slagar and half a dozen Others who had circled round to join him. They were all heavily armed. The young mouse, still driven by rage, haded a rock. Slagar dodged it easily and drew out his fearsome weapon. The three leather thongs whirred as

he swung them in a circle, the metal balls at the ends of the thongs dacking together viciously. The masked fox pointed at less Churchmouse.

"Drop that rock, mouse. Any of you runaways make a move and I'll smash little missie's skull to a pulp. 1 never miss."

Tess dosed her eyes tight and clasped her paws together. "Run, Mattimeo! Run for your life back to Redwall. Bring help!"

"Go on, do as she says," Slagar sniggered with glee. "After I've killed her, I'll kill you. To slay the Warrior of Redwall and his son in such a short time would make my revenge complete."

The rock fell from Mattimeo's open paw. Hot tears sprang to his eyes as he hung his head in defeat.

They were roughly herded together by Bageye and Skinpaw. The rope was looped about the neck of each of the mends as Bageye bound their paws in front with thongs.

Slagar nodded towards the south woodland fringe. "Right, lef s go. Oh, you can take your time now, there's nobody following us anymore. Hahahaha!"

Auma made a strangled noise, halfway between a growl and a sob. Dragging the captives with her, she fell back upon the huge mound of rubble and began digging furiously. It took all the slavers to drag her off.

Beating with canes and rope ends, they bludgeoned the little group off along the south trail through the summer woodlands.

Realization of what had taken place hit Sam Squirrel like a bolt, and tears trickled from his eyes. They all cried.

All except Mattimeo. His eyes were dry. Jaws denched tight, he strode upright, ignoring all about him but Slagar. Never once did his gaze leave the figure of the masked fox.

Slagar dropped back a pace to talk to Skinpaw.

"How far off are the others?" he asked.

'"Within two marches of the great cliffs. I've told them to wait at the foothills until we arrive. Chief."

"Good. It shouldn't be too difficult to catch them up. What are you staring at, mouse?"

"You should have killed me back at the canyon." Mattimeo's voice was flat and contemptuous.

Slagar eyed the bold young mouse and shook his head. "I've killed your father. His sword is buried with him. Thaf s enough for one day's work. You, I will let live to suffer."

Mattimeo stopped marching. His friends stopped also. The young mouse's eyes were hard with scorn.

"Then you're not only a cowardly murdering scum, you're a fool. Because from now on I live

with one purpose only: to kill you."

Slagar was taken aback by the determination and loathing that emanated from Mattimeo. He glared savagely at him, trying to frighten the young mouse into submission. Mattimeo glared back, completely unafraid. He was a different mouse altogether.

Snatching the willow cane from Skinpaw, the Cruel One struck out, lashing Mattimeo several times. The cane snapped. Slagar stood shaking, breathing hard through the silken mask.

Mattimeo curled his lip defiantly. He had not even felt the blows. "Get yourself another cane and try harder, half-face!"

"Skinpaw, Bageye! Keep this one marching up front with you. Move!"

Mattimeo was dragged off to the front of the column. Slagar marched behind, visibly shaken, glad that he could not feel the young mouse's eyes boring into him from behind.

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Though the missing young ones were uppermost in the minds of all the Redwallers, they tried to carry on with Abbey life in a normal fashion, keeping a brave face on things by going about their tasks in a cheerful manner.

Afternoon tea in Cavern Hole was served amid a great buzz of excitement. Copies of the twelve letters discovered by baby Rollo had been distributed, and there was a prize of a pink iced woodland plum and spice cake baked by the Abbot himself. John Churchmouse was strongly fancied to win it, though Abbot Mordalfus was having a serious try. Being the proud maker of such a cake, he wanted to keep it and admire it awhile. Baking was the Father Abbot's latest accomplishment. Ever since the making of his Redcurrantwall Abbot Alf Cake, he had been longing to try his paw at cake-making again. The moles formed a joint crew, and they sat scratching their velvety heads as they gazed at the twelve letters.

BBOOCTAPWERY.

"Burr, all oopside backways, if n you arsken oi."

"Hurr, quit talken an' get thinkin, Jarge, or you'll never win yon pinkice cake."

Cornflower had joined up with baby Rollo and Mrs. Churchmouse. Winifred, Brother Sedge and Ambrose Spike sat together. In various corners of the room small

groups kept hard at it, trying to solve the mystery of the twelve letters. Every once in a while some creature would approach the Abbot with a possible solution. Mordalfus in his position as judge looked each one over with a discerning eye. "Hmm, Baby power to be. Sorry, Sister May. As you see, there's only two letter Bs in the puzzle and you've used three. Next. Ah, Winifred, let's see your entry. Coop Water Byb? What in the name of acorns is that supposed to mean? No, I can't accept that one. Ah, John, well now we'll see who has won my beautiful cake."

John Churchmouse peered expectantly over the top of his glasses as the Abbot read out his solution.

"Cot Abbey prow. Strange words, John. Have you any reason for your answer?"

John polished his glasses, looking slightly sheepish. "Not really. Abbot. I tried several combinations, but this looked the most likely."

Mordalfus put John's entry to one side. "Well, who knows? We'll keep it as a possibility. Thank you, John."

"Thank you. Abbot. Er, have you tried to solve it yet?"

"No, f think it only fair that I stay as judge. However, if it isn't solved tonight then you can be judge tomorrow and I'll have a try then."

"We gorrit! We gorrit!" Baby Roflo ran forward, waving a parchment. He stumbled, fell, scrambled up and placed the crumpled entry in the Abbof s lap.

The kindly old mouse's eyes twinkled as he lifted Rollo onto the arm of his chair. "You're a clever fellow, Rollo. Did you solve this all by yourself?"

Cornflower and Mrs. Churchmouse winked at the Abbot. "Of course he did. We couldn't have done without him."

Mordalfus nodded wisely. "Well, lef s see what you've got. Abbey top crow. Ha, now this really looks like something we can investigate. .Abbey top crow, eh? Good. Well done, baby Rollo, not to mention your two helpers, of course. I think the cake goes to the three of you."

Cornflower, Mrs. Churchmouse and Rollo went into whispered conference, finally emerging with the decision that everyone be given a small slice, much to the delight of all.

After tea, the Abbey dwellers gathered on the sward in front of Redwall. Shading their eyes, they gazed up to the high roof. Queen Warbeak and her Sparra warriors were circling the spires, turrets and crenellations at the Abbof s request. There was not long to wait. Shortly Warbeak came zooming down at great speed and perched on a windowsill to make her report.

"Round top of roof, fourbirds, fourbirds," she told them.

The Abbot could hardly suppress his excitement. "What sort of birds? How high? Where?"

The Sparra Queen dosed her eyes, remembering the locations and types of bird. "Backa roof, hawkbird. This side, gooseflier. Other side, owlbird. That side, crow-bird. All wormbird stone, you see."

Cornflower took a few paces back and pointed upwards. "I can see a wild goose carved this side. 1 can just make it out. Look, it leans outwards with its wings spread. Funny, I've never noticed it before."

The Abbot settled his paws into his wide sleeves. "There are a great many things about Redwall that we do not know. It is an ancient and mysterious place. The longer I live here the more I see how everything our ancestors built into it has a story or a reason. It is all part of the Mossflower tradition and history. The goose is facing west towards the sunset and the great sea. That is the way they travel each late season. I think the hawk must face north. It is a warlike bird, and the northlands were always troubled by war. The owl, I guess, will face east to the dense forest and the rising sun. That only leaves one way for the crow to face."

The party walked round to the remaining side of the Abbey. John Churchmouse adjusted his glasses and pointed.

"South, the crow points south! What can't fly, yet has a beak? The crow made of stone, of course. We've found it! If only Jess or Sam Squirrel were here, they could climb up and investigate it."

Queen Warbeak puffed out her feathers. "Why squirrel climb? Sparra fly, me 'vestigate um crow stone."

The Sparra Queen was off like an arrow. From below, she looked like a small black speck as she hovered around the crow statue, which protruded from the high eaves. Warbeak did not stay long. She fluttered about, then winged down, landing with a sprightly hop on the gravelled path.

"Much wonnsign, go this way, go that way, up, down, round, round."

"Just as I thought," John Churchmouse groaned. "There's writing on the statue, but sparrows cannot read at all."

Mordalfus nudged him. "Hush, John. We don't want to offend Queen Warbeak. She's doing all she can to help. We'll j ust have to think of a way to get a copy of that writing down here."

Warbeak watched them talking. She knew what they were discussing. Cocking her head to one side, she winked her fierce bright eye. "How you do that. Sparra no can carry mouse, too wormfat, too big. Sparra no read um wonnsign like old mouse Abbot do with book. Plenty

problem."

The Abbot stroked his whiskers thoughtfully. "Indeed it is. Queen Warbeak, but we must help Matthias."

"Teach those birds to do a rubbin'." Ambrose Spike stepped forward with parchment and charcoal sticks. "I've often done it meself on some of the old barrel carvin's in the wine cellar. Pretty patterns they got carved on 'em."

Cornflower clapped her paws together. "Of course, that's the answer. I'm sure Queen Warbeak could rub over a parchment with charcoal if her Span-as held that

parchment fiat upon the writing. Here, give me a moment or two with Warbeak. I'm sure I can teach her."

With no sense of night or day, it was impossible to tell how long they had been trapped inside the cave. The air had become thicker, more rancid and hotter. Matthias felt his head throbbing with pain. He tried to stop his leaden eyelids closing in sleep and all around him he could hear the shallow, ragged breathing of the others. He had tried talking to them several times, but it was little use, they were all in a deep sleep approaching a state of coma. Gripping the handle of his marvelous sword tightly, he tried to concentrate on a way out. There was little hope. They were entombed in a cavern of virtually solid rock with a massive slide of earth and stone sealing the entrance.

The warrior mouse could stay awake no longer. He leaned back against the gently heaving bulk of Orlando and let his resolve drift. At first it was quite a peaceful feeling, save for the lack of air, which made breathing difficult and painful, but gradually his senses began to numb and he breathed shallowly in short pauses. As blackness enveloped him, the warrior mouse began dreaming.

He was in the Great Hall of his beloved Redwall Abbey. Sunlight streamed through the high windows in a coloured cascade, filtering through the stained glass, weaving patterns on the cool stone walls. Matthias was walking towards the long tapestry. He knew where he was going: to see Martin the Warrior. Yes, there he was, the great Founder Warrior and Champion of Redwall, standing proud in the center of his tapestry. Matthias was not at all surprised when Martin stepped out of the woven cloth and confronted him. He went forward to shake paws with Martin, but the figure backed away. His face was scowling and he picked

something up from the floor. It was Orlando's huge bartleaxe!

Matthias was shocked. Martin advanced upon him and prodded the axehead into his side. It nipped him painfully.

"Ouch! Martin, it's me, Matthias. Why are you attacking me?"

Martin jabbed Matthias in the side again, this time calling out in a loud accusing voice, "Why do you sleep, Warrior? You must save your son and his friends."

Matthias tried to reach his sword to defend himself as Martin thrust at him again, but his paws felt lifeless. They hung limp by his sides. He winced with pain as the great axe seared his side again. "A warrior who sleeps in time of danger is no warrior but a coward!"

"Ouch, stoppit!"

Matthias awoke to find he had somehow rolled off Orlando and was lying on the head of the axe. Each time he moved, it dug painfully into his side. Sitting upright, he rubbed the spot, realizing it had all been a fevered dream. But it was also help and a warning from his fellow warrior spirit.

Forcing himself upright, he held the axe by the twin blades, and by staggering about in the dark he located the blocked entrance. With agonizing slowness he pulled himself as high as he could up the sloping hill of debris until he was at its topmost point. Breaming hard, sweat starting out all over beneath his habit, Matthias began probing the rubble heap with the long axe handle. Pushing and shoving laboriously, he felt the long axe haft sink into the hill. Sometimes it struck a rock, but with a bit of manoeuvring he thrust it past the obstacle. Almost the full length of the haft was buried in the pile. With a final effort he gave one last painful shove, and fell forward as the haft 1 buried itself entirely. Slowly, wearily, he started waggling the shaft by pushing the twin blades from side to side, then very carefully he began withdrawing the axe from the hole he had made, with painstaking care sliding the axe back until it came all the way out.

Matthias knelt paw-deep in the rubble, hardly daring

to draw breath. Like the first kiss of sun upon ice in spring, he felt it on

his whiskers. . . .

Fresh air!

Tears of gratitude flowed freely through the dust upon the Warrior's face. Cool, dean, fresh air and a shaft of daylight poured in.

"Thank you, Martin. Thank you for our lives, my long-dead warrior friend."

Scrambling down off the heap, Matthias located Basil. Rubbing the hare's limbs and tugging at his ears, he pummelled and massaged as best he could. It took quite a while before there was any response, then Basil soon proved he was his old self.

"Owch ooch! Steady on, laddie. Tchah! Why'd you wake me, I was halfway through a leek and lettuce pastie and just gettin' ready to demolish a summer salad as big as a house. Huh, could've done it too if you hadn't come along, I say, my old head's burstin'. It must've bin that cask of elderberry wine me and old Spike drank together. Haha, I got more than him, though. Bigger swallow,

/see."

Matthias ruffled Basil's ears gratefully. "Come on, up on your paws, you old glutton. See to young Cheek, while I'll deal with jess. If 11 take three of us to bring Orlando round. I hope he hasn't stopped breathing

altogether."

It took them a considerable while to wake the others. Fortunately they were all still alive, though Orlando gave them a few anxious moments, and heads still ached. However, they were uplifted and heartened by the small flow of fresh air and the shaft of daylight that penetrated their tomb. Finally Orlando sat up, nursing his head.

"Ooh! I've got a headache big enough for ten badgers. I never knew fresh air could taste so good, though. If s like drinking from a cold mountain stream in midsummer."

"Steady on, old chap. Don't start talkin' about cold drinks, if s more than a body can stand, doncha know. Why, I remember the best drink I ever haMMMMFFF!"

Jess had stifled Basil's reminiscences with her thick furred tail. She held up a paw for silence. "Ssshhh, listen!"

In the sudden stillness they could faintly hear noises from outside.

Cheek danced up and down. "There's some creatures out there, I'm sure of it!"

They listened intently. Sure enough, faint sounds filtered in with the air and light through the hole.

Jabez Stump voiced his feelings: "Could be friends, or mayhap they could be enemies."

Orlando stood in the shaft of light. "Who cares, as long as we get out of here. Friend or foe, we can sort out later."

Matthias picked up his sword decisively. "Orlando is right, we must get out of here. Now, we must take a chance. If s a double risk because we may destroy our air supply. Are you with me?"

There was an immediate call of agreement.

Taking Orlando's axe, Matthias tied his swordbelt to the end of the handle, then he gave it to Basil. "Here, you've got the longest limbs, old fellow. Push that through the hole and waggle it about to attract attention."

Taking the battleaxe, Basil shinmed up the rubble and pushed the improvised pennant into the hole. Darkness fell as the light was blocked out. Cheek whimpered a bit then tell silent. All that could be heard was Basil grunting with exertion as he strove to gain attention, waving the handle to and fro by means of twisting the twin axeheads round and round.

"Anything happening yet, Basil?" Jess Squirrel called out hopefully.

"Can't tell yet, Jess. . . . Wait, I think someone has hold of the other end. Yes! They're pushing the axe back. Oof! Steady on. Think I'd better pull the handle back in

so we can parley through the jolly old hole with thingummybobbins, whoever they are."

Matthias scrambled up beside Basil. Luckily the hole was still open, even slightly wider when the axe handle was withdrawn.

Matthias put his mouth close to the hole and shouted, "Hello out there. We're trapped. Can you help us out?"

They waited.

From outside came the faint sound of many voices. They seemed to be squabbling and arguing. One voice came clearly to them down the narrow aperture. It was gruff and commanding.

"Who are you? State your name and tell us if you are of the Guosim?"

Matthias leaned back and gave a sigh of relief. "The Guosim! Thank goodness, they're friends."

Orlando climbed up the rubble beside Matthias and Basil. "Guosim, who in the name of stripes are they?"

"Careful what you say/' Matthias cautioned the big badger. "Leave the talking to me. Guosim are the Guerilla Union of Shrews in Mossflower. They can be very touchy and argumentative, and everything they do is governed by their own union rules and laws. Keep quiet now and let me be spokesbeast."

"If you are the Guosim, then let me talk to your Log-a-Log/' Matthias called down the hole.

Several voices came back at him.

"Who are you?"

"How do you know we have a Log-a-Log?" ' "Are you a friend or foe?"

There was a scrabbling noise and more sounds of dispute. This time the voice that came through was strong and louder than the rest.

"Out of my way! Give me room. Stand back, I say! Hello down there. I am the Log-a-Log. What do you want of me?"

Even in the urgency of the situation Matthias could not help smiling as he answered. "Log-a-Log, you old

bossywhiskers, it's me, Matthias of Redwall!"

The reply was a gruff chuckle. "Well, crumble my cake! Matthias, you old swordswinger, I should have known that Redwall accent. Ha, you're in a pretty pickle, no mistake. Don't worry, friend, I'll soon have you out of there, but first I've got to settle a small dispute out here. Some of these shrews seem to think they know more about Guosim rules than their Log-a-Log. Leave it to me. I'll soon straighten them out. Meanwhile, you just sit tight. We'll need digging tools and rocks and timber for shoring. This rubbish keeps sliding and moving. If II be a tricky task, but don't worry, I'll have supper ready for you when we haul you out of mere. How many are you?"

"Six altogether, Log-a-Log, a hedgehog, a badger, a young otter, Jess Squirrel and Basil Stag Hare."

"What? That old scoffin' windbag. I'm sorry I mentioned supper."

Basil's ears stood up indignantly. "I say, steady on, you scurvy little log-floater. Scoffin' windbag indeed!"

Jess Squirrel stifled a giggle. "I'd say he wasn't far wrong there, eh, Matthias?"

It was late afternoon when the shrew digging party broke through. The friends had sat in darkness most of the day, listening to digging and shoring interspersed with orders and arguments. Suddenly they were showered with rubble as a small head broke through framed by light.

"Flugg, stop bickerin' and pass me that branch. There! That ought to do it. Hello, cave dwellers. I'm Gum, the best digger the Guosim have got. Some say my granddad was a mole."

Orlando thrust forward a huge paw and patted the shrew. "Well, Gurn, I can't tell you how glad we are to see you. I'm Orlando the Axe."

"Hmm, big feller, aren't you? I hope this tunnel's wide enough to take you. You'd better go last, Orlando. Smallest first."

It was a painstaking and bruising operation, as one by one the friends were attached to a rope and forcibly pulled through by scores of shrews. Orlando waited until last. The tunnel caved in behind him as he was hauled and tugged along the makeshift rescue shaft.

In the early evening sunlight, Matthias and his friends laughed and splashed in the shallows of the river as they bathed away the dust and dirt of their imprisonment. Sunlight, clean air, fresh water and the sight of green growing things combined to make them realize how lucky they were to be alive. Even Jabez Stump chuckled happily as he splashed water into the air.

"Hohoho, ifn my old family could see me now. Ifs many a long season since this beast risked a bath, I can tell you."

Later that evening they sat around a shrew campfire, eating oatbread baked on flat rocks and drinking fresh river water with herbs crushed into it. Matthias told Log-a-Log all that had taken place from the night of the feast celebrating the Summer of the Golden Plain, up to the incident of the cave.

The shrew leader shook with rage. "Slavers! The slime of Mossfiower, treacherous murdering rogues. Our Guosim scouts have heard reports in Mossfiower since the end of spring about that masked fox and his dirty crew. I'm with you and your friends, Matthias. We'll track 'em and put an end to their evil trade. Taking young ones from their homes and families. I tell you it makes my blood boil just to think of it."

Basil had been munching his oatbread and gazing around the shrew camp, "'scuse me, old Log-a-thing, I know it's not unusual for you shrew fellers to argue a bit, but by and large you usually stick together. So tell me, what is that small group over there sittin' on their own around a separate fire for/' the old campaigner wondered.

Log-a-Log sniffed and threw a dead root on the fire. "Oh, that lot. They're trouble, Basil, particularly that

young feller Skan. He's been challenging my leadership lately. If 11 all come to a head tonight when I announce our new plans. When it does, I'd be grateful if you could keep your friends out of it, Matthias. No offence, but this is Guosim business."

Matthias nodded. "As you wish, Log-a-Log. Anyhow, I've no desire to be caught in the middle of a shrew argument. I've seen 'em before. But please don't let us be the cause of your trouble. You freed us from the cave and we are thankful for that. We can carry on our hunt alone, old friend."

The Guosim leader's eyes were bright and fierce. "Matthias, we are going with you, and that is final. Mossfiower needs to be kept free of evil if woodland families are to live in peace. It is no less than our duty to help. As for the coming trouble, you leave that to me." Log-a-Log took out a round black stone from his sling pouch and stood up. A smile hovered about his face momentarily. "Besides, life's not much fun to a shrew without trouble."

The slavers caught up with the main party two hours after nightfall. Mattimeo and his friends found themselves locked and manacled back on to the slave line. They slumped down wearily, tired and sore and hungry.

"None for you escapers," little Vitch sniggered evilly as he fed the other slaves. "Slagar said so. A taste of real hunger1!! make you a bit more obedient. Slagar says that when he's got a bit more time he's going to deal with each of you personally, especially you, little Redwall pet. Heeheehee."

Mattimeo bared his teeth and went into a crouch. Vitch hurriedly backed off and left them alone.

They looked around, trying to take stock of th»ir surroundings in the dark of night. One thing was obvious: they were camped in the foothills of an immense cliff range. The huge high plateau reared up behind them, blocking out the night-time sky.

Sam craned his neck backwards as he gazed up.

"I wonder how we're supposed to get up there?"

Jube lay back, dosing his eyes. "We'll find out tomorrow, on an empty stomach too."

They lay down to sleep, but Mattimeo sat up, staring in the direction of Slagar. less watched him. He was different, older, tougher and something else she could not quite put her paw on.

"Mattimeo, what is it?" she asked. "You've changed since we were recaptured."

The young mouse patted Tess's paw. 'If s nothing, Tess. Go to sleep. I'm sorry I got angry at Tim today. In fact, I'm sorry for a lot of things. Perhaps you were right when you said that I should be more like my father. Maybe if s a bit too late now, but I'm certainly going to try. From now on Redwall must live on through Martin, my father and me. I was born the son of the Redwall Warrior, sword or no sword, and that is what I intend to be, to myself, and most of all to you and to my friends."

It was then that Tess Churchmouse realized Mattimeo was no longer the wild and wayward young mischief-maker he had always been. Sitting next to her was a mouse who looked tike Martin and Matthias. Despite the fact that they were captives in a strange place, she felt suddenly safe and protected in his presence.

The young one had become a warrior!

Cornflower, Abbot Mordalfus, Foremole and Queen Warbeak were in the gatehouse cottage. It had long gone midnight, but they sat around on the hearthrug with the parchment before them. It was covered by the markings of the charcoal stone-rubbing taken from the stone crow high on the south wall of the Abbey.

The Sparra Queen preened herself proudly. "Verree good, eh? Sparra no missee thing, get all um wormsign."

"Hurr Hurr, that you'm 'ave, clever ol' burdbag," Foremole congratulated her.

The Father Abbot folded back his sleeves. "Thank you, Queen Warbeak. Well, let us see what we have here. A map, by the look of it, and a poem to translate. I can do mat. Watching John brought it all back to me."

They scanned the parchment.

"Those who wish to challenge fate, To a jumbled shout walk straight. Sunset fires in dexteree, Find where Loamhedge used to be. At the high place near the skies, Look for other watchful eyes. Sleep not 'neath the darkpine trees, . Be on guard, take not your ease,

Voyage when the daylight dims,

Danger in the water swims.

Make no noise with spear or sword,

Lest you wake the longtail horde.

Shades of creatures who have died.

Bones of warriors who tried.

Shrink not from the barren land,

Look below from where you stand,

This is where a stone may fall and make no sound at all.

Those who cross and live to tell,

See the badger and the bell,

Face the lord who points the way

After noon on summer's day.

Death will open up its grave.

Who goes there . . . ? None but the brave."

The Abbot nodded wisely. "If s a lot dearer now. This is a crude map and a poem that tells a bit more than the last one. In fact, if s a key to the rhyme that was found beneath the Abbey."

Cornflower was puzzled. "How so, Father Abbot?"

The old mouse tapped his paw upon the design in the bottom corner. "There. Thorn,' 'shout.' Thafs only north and south mixed up. ... A jumbled shout, as in: walk straight to a jumbled shout."

Cornflower smiled as recognition dawned. "Of course, it means go due south."

Foremole wrinkled his nose. "Whoi didden oi think o' that? If you'm a-walken south then sun must be a-setten in dexteree."

"Where is dexteree?" It was the Abbot's turn to look puzzled.

Foremole chuckled and pointed at the Abbof-s left eye. "Thaf n thurr be sinistree." Moving his paw, he pointed at the Abbot's right eye. "An' thaf n be yurr dexteree."

The Abbot smiled and scratched his head. "Foolish of me. Sinister and dexter, left and right. In the old language of Loamhedge, sinistree is left eye, dexteree

right eye. So you must be travelling south with the sun setting in your right eye. Thank you, Foremole."

"Moi pleasure, Abbot zurr."

"So one thing is apparent," Cornflower interrupted, "keep travelling south, straight south, no matter what. I hope Matthias is doing that, wherever he, Jess and Basil are now. Oh, Father Abbot, if only we could get this information, this map and poem, to them right now. They mean very little to us sitting here in Redwall, but to my Matthias, why, he might be able to see the very places the map and poem tell of."

"Indeed," the Abbot shrugged sadly. "Not only that, but it tells the exact route and even clues to the dangers they will encounter: the woodland trees, the water, when to cross it, the longtails, the place where stones fall and make no sound - if s all here - badgers' heads, bells. Lord of Mossflower. Cornflower, you are right, if s about as much use to us as a snowfall in summer, but to them. ..."

"Then you make oopee. All Sparra fly, all Sparra, much kmg, fly plenty, find um my friend Matthias with old kmgears and treejumper. We find, you see."

Cornflower was taken aback. "Queen Warbeak, I don't know, but how . . . ?"

The Sparra Queen hopped onto the mantelpiece and cocked her head to one side jauntily. "No worry. Warbeak Queen, Sparra warriors do what me say. Matthias, Redwall, all good to Warbeak and Sparra folk. We do this for you, for you."

"Splendid!" For a mouse of his many seasons, the Abbot did a surprisingly agile leap up onto his paws. "I will rouse Brother Sedge, Sister Agnes, Brother Rufus, Sister May. Together with myself and John Church-mouse, they should be able to copy the map and the poem several times over before first light. I take it you -Will want to leave at dawn. Queen Warbeak?"

The sparrow bowed gravely. "First wormlight, old-mouse Abbot, all Sparra fly south."

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Outside the gatehouse window, other ears were listening. A large magpie dacked his beak together in satisfaction and took off for the woodlands beyond the Abbey's north wall.

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BOOKTWO

General Ironbeak

Matthias and his friends watched in silence as Log-a-Log held up the black stone in one paw and addressed the shrews seated on the river bank in the quiet summer's evening.

"Members of the Guosim, you have heard the tale Matthias of Redwall and his friends related to us. There is evil abroad in Mossflower; this we already knew. Savers, the masked fox and his band, have captured young creatures. Even now they are marching them south."

"So, what has this got to do with us?" the shrew named Skan interrupted.

Log-a-Log turned on the insolent one. "Silence, Skan! Do not show your bad manners by calling out while I hold the stone at a council meeting. If you wish to say anything, then wait until I have finished and it is your turn to hold the stone. This is the rule of the Guosim." , Skan sniggered and muttered something to his cronies. Standing boldly, he faced Log-a-Log.

"If s a stupid rule, like all your silly Guosim customs. I am a tree shrew and I'll talk when I feel like it."

Immediately a hubbub and argument broke out on both sides.

Orlando pawed his axe. He made to rise, but Matthias

warned him, "Sit still friend. Leave this to Log-a-Log."

The shrew leader restored order by raising his voice above the rest.

"LogaJogalogalog! Listen to me, shrews. The creatures of Redwall have always been our good friends. If we were hungry, if we were hurt, if we were sick, the Brothers and Sisters of the Abbey would help us without question. It is our duty to help them now. I say we go with Matthias and his companions. We will fight the slavers and rescue the young ones. Are you with me?"

There was a loud shout of agreement from the main body, but Skan and his followers stood to one side, silent and sneering. Log-a-Log walked stiff-legged to where Skan stood. The shrew leader thrust his face dose to the young usurper, his hackles bristling dangerously.

"And you, Skan, are you for the Guosim or against it?"

"Guosim, huh!" Skan said scornfully, though he avoided Log-a-Log's eyes. "A pile of old fuddy-duddies making outdated rules and regulations, why should me and my friends get ourselves slain or injured sorting out the troubles of others. I say we mind our own business."

Log-a-Log smiled coldly. "So, it has come to this. You have been pushing and prodding me for quite a while now, Skan. Perhaps you would like to be the new Log-a-Log of the Guosim? Well, now is your chance. Lef s see if you fight as bravely as you talk. Come on, Skan, knock this council stone from an old fuddy-duddy's paw."

The shrew leader stood in front of the young rebel, holding out the stone for all to see. He looked relaxed, though his whole body was tensed like a steel spring. Skan stood half a head taller than Log-a-Log. For a moment it looked as if he were about to do something, then he saw the light of battle in the shrew leader's eyes and his nerve failed him. He turned away.

"Yah, who wants to be bothered with the Guosim? I'm away to roam free and do as I like. Come on, shrews."

Skan and his group of followers marched off into the fading light.

There was an audible sigh of relief throughout the shrew camp. The main body, who were with Log-a-Log, sat back and relaxed amid a general chatter of conversation.

Orlando nudged Matthias. "He's not short of courage, your friend Log-a-Log. That Skan was bigger and heavier than him by far. Do you think he could have beaten him?"

Matthias smiled knowingly. "Log-a-Log may be small, but he's the fiercest shrew warrior I've ever seen, though he's no bully like Skan. The rest of the Guosim know this. Log-a-Log is a good leader, he's as wise as he is brave."

Log-a-Log came and sat with them. He clapped Matthias on the back. "Sony about that, old RedwaUer, though it's none of your fault. Skan and his pals have been niggling at me all season, and it had to come to a head sooner or later. Ah well, at first light tomorrow we'll follow the fox. He's travelling south; my scouts have cut his track several times over the past few days."

Slagar rose silently while the rest slept. He made his way quietly through the camp and across the foothills until he was at the base of the gigantic cliffs which stretched away in both directions as far as the eye could see. Drawing out his leather-thonged weapon, he twirled it until the metal balls dacked together loudly in the still night air. There was an answering rap from the top of the plateau, as if two rocks had been banged sharply together.

Slagar the Cruel smiled beneath his silken mask. He looked up and saw the two rope ladders uncoiling themselves as they fell from the heights. Giving each of mem a tug to make sure they were secure, the fox stole off back to the camp and his slave line.

The peace of a warm summer night lay over Moss-flower. It was a peace that would not last.

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General Ironbeak perched in a great cedar which stood near the northern woodland fringe close to Redwall in Mossflower country. On the bough beside him, the crow Mangiz watched golden dawn light flooding from the east. On a lower branch, three magpie brothers, Quick-bill, Brightback and Diptail, awaited the raven General's orders. In the trees to either side of them a small army of rooks were gathered, basking in the mild summer weather; it was a welcome change for all.

The birds respected Ironbeak as a shrewd commander. He had given them victories and kept their bellies full, and he was the most feared fighting bird in all the far cold northland. General Ironbeak had led his fighters from the bleak places of the north to this new territory, and they marvelled at the warm weather, the vast green forest with its cool shade, plentiful water and easy foraging. They sat in the lower terraces of the foliage, content in their new surroundings, but ready to fly at Ironbeak's bidding.

The raven General relied upon the word of his seer, the crow Mangiz. He seldom arrived at any decision without first consulting him. Today was different. During the night, Quickbill the magpie had made his report, apprising the General of the latest news from

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Redwall. Now Ironbeak and Mangiz perched side by side, their eyes half closed, not looking at each other as they talked.

"Arrah! It is as I said, my General. The great redstone house is only a smallflight from us. You heard Quickbill, soon the sparrows will be gone and there will be none to give warning against us/'

The raven blinked as sunlight caught the corner of his eye. "My good right wing, Mangiz, it is

as you foretold. Truly the redstone house is a wonderful place. Tell me more of it."

The impassive crow ruffled his neck down into dark breast feathers. 'The sparrows fly south, my visions told me this. Where they go I do not know. Grakk! That need not concern us. The roofspaces will be unguarded, and we can take care of any old ones or nestlings that are left. Below on the ground there are many earthcrawlers, a great stripedog, hedgepig, waterhound and mice wearing robes. There are no warriors or fighters to do battle with."

Ironbeak came alert as the distant sounds of the Matthias and Methuselah bells tolled out a new day in die Summer of the Golden Plain.

"Listen, Mangiz, the bells are welcoming us. It is a great thing to have a redstone house with bells. Arrakl The only time before this that I heard a bell was upon the northland's great waters. It was on a ship that sank in a great storm. I never knew that houses had bells. What else does your vision tell you about the redstone?"

The seer crow shut his eyes tight. "The place has big lands enclosed by a wall. Enough food grows there to feed the whole northland, and there is a pool with fishes in it. Take my word, it is a place of plenty."

Ironbeak's bright eyes shone. "Yagga! Well told, my Mangiz. You are seldom wrong. Quickbill, take your brothers and watch the redstone house. Do not be seen. When the sparrows are gone, report back here. Grub-daw, Ragwing, take sentry duty. The rest of you keep low and hidden. Rest awhile, my fighters."

The three magpies dipped their tails in salute before winging off through the trees. Amid a ruffling of feathers and scratching of talons, the others settled down to enjoy a rest in the warm summer morning. Ironbeak shuffled restlessly along the maple bough. He was clearly impatient.

"We have travelled far together, my General," Mangiz said soothingly. "Wait now, the great redstone house will soon be yours. You will conquer it from the top downwards. Walls were built only for earthcrawlers. We will arrive like silent arrows from the sky. Patience, Iron-beak."

The raven leader settled down, reassured. "This is a good land to be in, Mangiz. It is not cold like those northlands, and the redstone house will be mine. It was your visions that first saw it; if you say the signs say wait, then we wait."

Cornflower and Mrs. Churchmouse stood on the south ramparts, keeping tight hold of baby Rollo as he waved and shouted. The bells pealed merrily while the Sparra folk of Queen Warbeak flew south across the woodlands in the cloudless blue morning. Constance and the Abbot cheered as lustily as any at the brave sight. The Sparra Queen circled the Abbey once, then dipping her wings she dropped like a stone, taking up a zinging flight as she brushed by the creatures on the battlements.

"We find um, you see, we find um!" she called.

Warbeak flew high, shooting like a speeding arrow into the vanguard of the feathered squadron. Soon they became dark specks which rapidly disappeared into the distance over Mossflower.

John Churchmouse flexed both his paws and massaged the back of his neck wearily as he descended the wallsteps with Brother Sedge.

"Whew! Well, thank goodness that's over. Maybe we can catch up on a little sleep now, eh, Sedge?"

Brother Sedge grubbed charcoal-stained paws into his

red-rimmed eyes. "Aye, it's straight up to the dormitory for me, John. It certainly takes it out of you, sitting up all night drawing maps and writing poems. I just hope that one of those birds finds Matthias and the others. I'd hate to think that we worked in vain."

John stretched wearily. "Ho hum! Well, there's at least twelve copies and they're all carried by trusty Sparra scouts. If they can't find them nobeast can. I wonder whaf s for breakfast?"

"Breakfast indeed, John Churchmouse," Mrs. Church-mouse rutted airily as she passed by. "You've done nothing but eat all night. Still, I suppose you could find room for some nutbread, blackcurrant cordial and elderberry pancakes before you sleep the day away."

John leaned wearily against the Abbey wall. "Hmm, s'pose so, dear. I'll be in soon. Tell that baby Rollo to save a pancake or two for me. Basil certainly taught him how to deal with the rations, the little nosebag." He wiped his grimy paws on his habit and blinked owlishly. "'s funny, I could swear I saw a magpie above the west wall just then, did you see anything. Sedge?"

Brother Sedge stifled a yawn. "Oh come on, John, lef s get breakfast. You're seeing things. There hasn't been a magpie ever recorded in this neck of the woods."

The morning wore on with the gentle pace of Red wall life. Three magpies winged their way low and slow to the maple at the north fringe.

That same morning saw Matthias and his friends marching shoulder to shoulder with Log-a-Log and the shrew army, south through the trees, upon the trail of Slagar. Orlando stopped in a clearing and pointed ahead with his axe.

"Is that a cloudbank on the horizon, or some sort of landrise?"

They halted and gazed in the direction he was pointing.

Matthias shook his head. "Could be anything. What d'you think, Log-a-Log?"

The shrew leader shaded his eyes. "That must be the Great South Cliffs. I've heard of them, but the Guosim have never wandered that far south before. Well, lef s press on and see for ourselves. I reckon we should make them by late evening if we march at the double."

A short meal break was taken for shrew oatcakes and water. Keeping the cliffs ahead as a bearing, the searchers set out at a fast double pawstep.

Slagar had split his band in two, half in front and half behind the slave line as they began the ascent of the rope ladders hanging down from the top of the plateau. The masked fox snapped out instructions.

"Listen you lot, keep your paws tight on those rungs. Don't look up or down. If s a good drop, even from halfway up these ladders. You wouldn't live through it, so if you want to reach the top in one piece then keep your wits about you. Threeclaws, you go first to show 'em. When you reach the top make sure the prisoners are well staked down until I get there. Stonefleck's waiting up there. Do as he says. Right, get going!"

Mattimeo climbed stolidly, trying hard to keep some slack in the running line to make it easier for Tess and Cynthia, who were on the rungs below him. Auma climbed steadily. She was above Mattimeo. Young Jube would slip now and then, accidentally kicking the badger on her head, but she toiled upwards without complaint. Tim was above Jube and Sam was the top climber, being the more experienced. He chanced a look below when they were over halfway up. The drop was dizzying, even for a squirrel. The other slaves were way below, treading nervously on each separate rung as they were chivvied along by the slavers.

"Come on, dozypaws, or you'll feel my cane."

"Up, you stupid creature, don't look down."

"Hey you, get a move on up there."

"Ow! You great lump, you're treading on my paws."

It was midafternoon by the time they reached the giddy heights on top of the cliffs. At first no creature noticed the big rat who sat watching them from a rocky outcrop. It was only when he moved towards them that they could distinguish him. Stonefleck was grey and dirty white with black markings. He could lie still anywhere and be taken for a rock, a ground shadow or part of the scenery. He was large for a rat and not given overmuch to talking, and he carried a heavy bow and a well-laden quiver of arrows. Threeclaws was taken aback. Stone-fleck seemed to materialize out of the rocks.

"Where's the masked one?" The raf s voice was flat and toneless.

"He'll be here soon. Are you Stonefleck?" The rat did not reply. He seated himself at the cliffs edge and awaited the arrival of Slagar, looking for all the world like a boulder perched on the brink of the plateau.

The slave lines were staked to the ground by pegs. Mattimeo and the other captives sat regaining their breath after the long climb, which had been made doubly difficult because of manacles and running line. The slavers surrounded them, panting hard from their exertions. Over the cliff edge, Mossflower sprawled away into the sunlit distances. Tess stared out hopefully. Somewhere out there was their beloved Redwall Abbey, though it was too far away to see. The little churchmouse comforted herself with the thought that her mother and father, if they were alive, would probably be going in to afternoon tea in Cavern Hole. She brushed a tear of homesickness from her eye and sniffed.

Slagar was last up. He nodded to Stonefleck.

'Is this all you brought?" the rat asked, indicating the captives.

The silk mask pulled in and out against the Cruel One's face as he breathed heavily. "It's enough, rat. they're all young, strong and healthy. If you wanted

more, you should have tried climbing down from here and catching them yourself. I'll speak to you later. First I've got business to attend to. Wedgeback, get yourself over here!"

"Who, me?" The stoat pulled a paw at himself.

"Who d'you think, numb brain, the weasel behind you? Come here." Sugar's voice was tight and dangerous.

Nervously Wedgeback looked round at his companions. They seemed to be intent on minding their own business; nobeast wanted to see what was about to happen. Falteringly the stoat made his way over to the cliff edge where Slagar stood waiting. The masked fox seized a pawful of Wedgeback's soft belly. Digging his claws painfully deep, he pulled the frightened stoat forward until he was breathing down the terrified creature's nostrils. A slight breeze rippled the silken hood mask. Slagar had never looked more scary. The stoat gulped aloud, his face a fraction from the slitted eyes. Slagar was actually smiling.

"Wedgeback, old friend, let me tell you something. When I leave you in charge of the prisoners, it means that you have to guard them carefully and let none escape."

"B-but S-Slagar, I..."

"Hush, ssshhh!" The Cruel One's voice was deceptively soothing. "Don't interrupt, if s bad manners. You've got a lot to learn, Wedgeback. Pity you won't have time, though. Where was I? Oh, yes. You know the trouble we went through to get those creatures from Redwall Abbey, yet the moment my back was turned you let them escape, didn't you?"

The stoat was almost incoherent with tear. Slagar's daws were piercing his belly and he felt totally helpless. "I didn't know they were g-goin' to 'scape, honest."

Slagar began slowly turning Wedgeback so mat the stoat had his back to the cliff edge. He was teetering on the brink.

"But they did escape. No thanks to you, I caught them

again. There's no room in my band for blunderers, Wedgeback. You'll have to go."

Wedgeback's eyes rolled wildly. "I'll go, Slagar. I promise I'll never come back again. Please don't hurt me, just let me go."

"As you wish, my friend. Goodbye!"

Slagar let go of the stoat, at the same time giving him a slight push. The luckless Wedgeback

vanished over the edge of the heights with a scream of despair.

Dumbstruck at the horror of the callous killing he had just witnessed, Mattimeo shuddered. Turning his head aside, he clasped Tess and Cynthia, who buried their faces in his robe.

Slagar peered over the cliff edge at the broken carcass on the rocks below. Stonefleck joined him, his face still impassive as he pointed to a small group making then-way through the foothills.

"Look, fox, shrews. Do you know them?"

Slagar peered hard at the group. They were just arriving at the rope ladders. Momentarily they recoiled with horror at the sight of Wedgeback's corpse. Cupping his paws round his muzzle, Slagar called down to them. "Who are you and what do you want?"

The answer came floating faintly up on the warm afternoon air. "I am Skan and these are my followers. I have information for Slagar."

"I am Slagar," the fox called back down. "Bring your Iriends up here, Skan. Use the rope ladders."

While the shrews made their way up the cliff face, Slagar held a silent conference with his band. They nodded at his plan. The masked fox laughed quietly.

and his followers were panting with exertion as they pulled themselves on to the plateau. At a signal from Slagar, the slavers pulled the rope ladders up.

While his followers sat about on the clifftop regaining their breath, Skan spoke to Slagar.

"Whew! What a time we've had. We ran all the way/ following your trail through the woods. We haven't stopped or eaten a thing today. Listen, there's a whole army coming after you: Log-a-Log and his shrews. They rescued Matthias and those others from the cave, dug 'em out. . . ."

Slagar was surprised. "What? You mean to tell me those Redwall creatures are still alive?"

Skan wiped sweat from his brow. "Phew! Oh yes, very much so. In fact, they've joined up with the Guosim, thafs the shrews you know, and together they've vowed to track you and your band down and slay the lot of you."

The fox stroked his silken mask pensively. "Hmmm, well, thafs nothing new. There's lots of creatures would like to slay me. By the teeth of hell! 1 thought I'd buried those Redwallers for good. But why should you dash all the way here to tell me this?"

"Because I want my revenge on Log-a-Log and his stupid Guosim, and you can help me."

"Oh, I see," Slager nodded. "You and your friends have broken away from the shrews due to some sort of bad blood, is that vtr

Skan narrowed his eyes. "Something like mat, but thaf s my worry, not yours. The thing is now for us to join together and defeat them. Together we can be a strong force."

Slagar helped Skan up and put a friendly paw about his shoulders.

"What a good idea, Skan. However, I have no need to fight with anybeast following us. See, the ladders have been pulled up. There's no way we can be attacked, we're completely safe up here."

Skan looked angry and puzzled. "But what about me and my followers?*'

Slagar chuckled. "Well, you can climb down and fight mem yourself if you wish, or you can stay up here with

The shrew was crestfallen. "I thought you'd want to fight them and be rid of them. I suppose we'll have to stay here and join up with your band. We're too few to face them alone."

Slagar signalled to his crew and they began forming a semicircle around the shrews, who were standing with their backs to the cliff edge. The slavers were heavily armed. "Right, it's a deal then, Skan," Slagar said. "We'll let you join up with us. Not with my band, of course, but with my slave line."

The fox suddenly grasped Skan in a headlock, reliev-. ing him of his short sword, which he held at the shrew's neck. "Surrender your weapons," Slagar snarled at the shrews, "or he dies and you lot go over the edge!"

"You traitor, you scum! We came here to warn you," Skan spluttered.

"So you did," Slagar laughed scornfully. "You were prepared to sell your own kind out. Let me tell you, Skan, when it comes to double-dealing, there's nobeast better at it than Slagar the Cruel. Chain 'em up!"

Weeping with frustration, the shrews were disarmed »nd chained to the slave line.

fe.

teaching across, Auma pinned Skan to the ground with

a hefty paw at his throat. "Give me the right answers, turncoat, or you're dead.

My father is Orlando the Axe, that mouse's father is

Matthias of Redwall, the squirrel has a mother named

$$tf and the young hedgehog there, his father's name is

|abez. Are they alive and well?" - Skan gurgled and spluttered until Auma released him.

" "Yes, yes, they're alive, and an old hare named Basil

and a young otter too, though I didn't get his name." "Mattimeo and his friends laughed with delight and

ffefief. Auma gave Skan a mighty pat on the head that

Completely stunned him. %;"Haha, they're alive. Oh, I do feel better now!"

us.

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The evening bells tolled out across the countryside at Redwall. It was a windless summer twilight; not a leaf stirred on branch or bough, the earth and grass were still warm from the hot afternoon. The Abbey dwellers ceased their daily tasks and went indoors for the evening meal. Mole cooks had baked a traditional tater'n'turnip-'n'beetroot deeper'n'ever pie. There was fresh fruit and cream, mint wafers and cider. A garland of yellow flowers graced the table center in honour of the season. None of them knew that murder had been done that day.

When the sun was at its zenith, General Ironbeak and his raiders had flown up as high as they

could, hovering on the high thermals far above Redwall, then they quietly plummeted down. Four by four they came, each bird entering under the high eaves from a different point. The General led the secret attack, swiftly and silently dealing death to the few old sparrows and iate nestlings who were unable to fly. The dreadful deed was accomplished with quiet efficiency; Ironbeak and his birds were seasoned warriors.

Mangiz perched in the crossbeams next to his General

while the rooks searched through the pitifully empty sparrow nests. One cackled harshly. Ironbeak swooped down and felled him with a savage peck.

"Silence! The great redstone house is not yet ours. I do not want those creatures below to know we are here. Quickbiil and his brothers will bring in food soon, when night falls. Until then you must all be still and make no noise."

He flew back to perch with Mangiz, but the crow seemed somewhat disturbed. Ironbeak noticed his seer was not his usual self.

"What is it, my Mangiz? Are you having more visions?" he asked.

"No, the strange thing is that my vision is clouded. The eye within my mind has been blurred since we came here today. Whatever I try to see becomes difficult. It is an earthcrawler, a mouse dressed strangely; he carries a sword and seems to bar all my visions."

Ironbeak closed his eyes. "Do not worry, Mangiz. Maybe it is a good omen."

Mangiz clacked his beak doubtfully. "We will see, my General."

. Oops a daisy! Up the stairs to bed with you, HtdeRoUo."

Mrs. Churchmouse chased after baby Rollo, but he ducked beneath the table and began singing.

"I wrestle a fish upon a dish,

Cut off his 'ead while he's in bed,

an' take a rat an' make him dead,

for goooooood ooooooold cideeeeeeemTnr!"

Sister May and Cornflower helped Mrs. Churchmouse. They scrambled under the table and chased Rollo out into her waiting paws.

"Gotcha, you little monster. Now off to bed with you." - "No no, dowannago! Dowannagorrabed!"

"Please, Rollo, be a good fellow. Tell you what, if I

come up with Cornflower and Sister May and we sing songs, then will you go?"

Rollo chuckled until his little fat body shook. "Yep, yep. Singa singa song f Rollo."

The three mouse ladies took the infant bankvole up to the dormitory on the floor above Great Hall, where he was dutifully put into a cot.

After several songs, Cornflower held a paw to her lips. "Ssshhh, he's asleep. Come on, quietly now."

Rollo opened one eye. He watched them tip-paw out. As soon as the door was closed, he pulled his nightshirt above his paws and scrambled out of the cot.

Halfway down the stairs. Sister May heard the dormitory door slam. "Mercy me, the little rogue has escaped. Quickly!"

They bounded back up the spiral staircase, reaching the landing in time to see Rollo climb another curving night of stairs.

Cornflower stamped her paw down hard. "Back to bed, baby Rollo, this instant!"

Rollo turned and giggled, then he waved to them. Mrs. Churchmouse heard a slight noise on the stairs above Rollo, and was about to call out to him. Suddenly a large raven poked its villainous black head round the spiral and seized Rollo by the nightshirt in its wicked beak.

The little bankvole screamed aloud as he was dragged backwards up the stairs.

Darkness had fallen when Matthias and his new-found army reached the foothills. They were forced to camp there for the night until morning light revealed their position. Shrew fires glimmered, and the chatter and noise of the argumentative little beasts made Matthias wish Log-a-Log had never offered the help of the Guosim. The warrior mouse sat alone on the brow of a small rise, then he was joined by Orlando and Jabez Stump.

The hedgehog nodded towards the cliffs rearing high overhead. "Puzzles me as to 'ow any creature 'ceptin' a bird could get to the top of there. You're sure they went mis way?"

Basil Stag Hare sauntered up out of the darkness. "Sure? You could bet your summer spikes on it, old lad. They've scaled the bally heights all right, though how they did it beats me. One clue though, I've just stumbled over the carcass of one of those stoat fellers. Either he thought

he could fly or he missed his paw hold. Ugh! Nearly put me off m'supper, it did."

"It must have been pretty grim to banish thoughts of food from your mind, Basil," Matthias chuckled. "The question is, how do we get up there tomorrow?"

Orlando tested his axe blade against his paw. "And when we do get up there, d'you think they'll have laid some sort of trap? Maybe the fox is waiting until we're halfway up to start hurling rocks and boulders down on us."

"That's a chance we'll have to take," Matthias shrugged, "though I don't think Slagar knows we're alive. He'll probably press on to get his captives to their destination, wherever that is."

The old hare squatted down beside Matthias. "I picked up the tracks of that young shrew Skan and his cronies this afternoon. They were making for this point well ahead of us. I think the bally old fox knows we're still alive and kickin', one way or another."

The warrior mouse unbuckled his sword and lay down in the grass.

"We'll know tomorrow. Rest now."

Mattimeo and his companions on the slave line were being driven hard and fast. Evidently there was to be little rest that night. Slagar and Stonefleck led the column. Before they set out, the masked fox had addressed them: "Tonight you must move swiftly and silently. I tell you

this because there is no other way. Stonefleck here will guide us, he knows the paths to take. When we reach the Forest, there is danger, so be silent, travel fast, and you will come out unharmed. Now get moving!"

It was difficult going. They were forced into a stumbling dogtrot; the chain manacles and the heavy slave line were a great handicap for the prisoners. Surprisingly, the slavers helped them all they could. Sam was baffled.

"Matti, Tess, why haven't they got the canes swinging? Usually we get beaten and bullied, but all of a sudden they're being almost nice to us."

Auma caught Tim as he stumbled. "They're not shouting and yelling at us either. I'd say they look pretty frightened themselves."

"There's a forest up ahead," Jube called back to them in a loud voice. "D"you suppose that has something to do with it?"

"Please, don't shout or you'll get us all killed!" Drynose the weasel guard had an almost pleading whine to his voice.

The forest, when they reached it, looked eerie and forlorn in the dim light. Old gnarled trees spread their knotted branches wide and low, there was little grass on the floor, and no flowers were to be seen anywhere. Mattimeo saw the withered and bleached skeleton of a rat dangling from a bough halfway up a tree, and there were other bones too, scattered here and there throughout the branches. The young mouse decided to keep quiet about them; no sense in panicking his friends, chained up as they were.

"I've noticed those bones too," Auma whispered in his ear. "We'd best keep quiet. If anybeast gets attacked if 11 probably be us, who have no chance of making a run for it."

Bending low to avoid hanging branches, they pushed onward as fast as possible, following Slagar and Stone-

fleck. Occasionally Mattimeo could hear guttural noises up in the trees, and now it seemed that everyone had sported grisly remains hanging in the boughs, though no creature made mention of it.

Tess Churchmouse shuddered. She had never been in such a sinister place. Catching up with Mattimeo, she grasped the back of his robe and clutched it tight. The young mouse patted her paw in the darkness.

"Don't be frightened, Tess," he whispered. "We'll make it. There's nothing to be afraid of. Hold tight and look straight ahead."

Tess was comforted by his quiet confidence.

Marching half the night, pawsore and exhausted, they carried on, driven by fear of the unknown. Stonefleck nudged Slagar. He pointed ahead to a break in the trees. The forest was thinning.

At that very moment, Browntooth the stoat, who was marching pn the left flank of the slave line, received a sharp jab in the eye from an overhanging branch which Halftail had brushed to one side. The springy branch swished back into place just as the unfortunate stoat drew level with it. The spell of silence was broken by his screams.

"Arrrgh! Owow! Me eye, me eye!"

Slagar broke into a fast sprint, shouting as he went, "Run for it, follow me, to the shore, to the shore!"

The slavers dashed off, leaving the captives to fend for themselves. They ran, tripping and stumbling, scrambling over their fallen comrades in an effort to get out of the woods.

"Pick up the rope, keep in line, run as fast as you can," Mattimeo shouted to the slave line. "Help the others. If one of us falls we're all done for!"

They went pell-mell, pulling their stumbling comrades up with the line as they ran, and the back runners were virtually dragged along. Suddenly the air was full of harsh cries, and a number of dark shapes descended

upon them. It was a fierce onslaught on slaves and slavers alike. The screams of the injured echoed round in the forest. Auma felt sharp claws strike back at her back. She bared her teeth, snapping at the thing that was attacking her.

"Help, help! Eeee!"

Caught by several of the strange attackers, Skan the shrew began to rise into the air. He screamed and kicked for dear life. Tim and Mattimeo felt the slaveline straining and dragging them back as Skan was pulled upwards. Auma turned and grasped the rope in her teeth. Aided by Tim and Mattimeo, she tugged sharply. Skan fell to earth with a bump, but even this quick action had not saved him. Auma seized the limp form and swung it across her broad back.

Rushing from the forest, they found themselves on the broad shores of a wide river, it glimmered and waved in the starlight. Stagar stood by a broad trench covered with boughs urging diem on.

"Come on, in here, hurry!"

Gratefully they threw themselves under its protection. Most of the slavers had already arrived, and they sat shivering and breathless. Slagar was the last to enter. "Scringe, Vitch, cover each end of this trench," he ordered. "Keep yourselves awake, and keep an eye on those woods. Threeclaws, did all the slaves make it?"

"All except Skan the shrew. He's had it. Chief."

"Then unchain him and sling his worthless hide out. What about you lot, are you all right? Anybeast missing, Halftail?"

"Two of ours. Chief; Browntooth and Badrag. I saw 'em go meself. It was 'orrible, screamin' an' kickin' they were. By the claw! What are those things that attacked us?"

Stonefleck squatted impassively. "The painted ones," he said, his voice flat and matter of fact.

Slagar moved aside as two slavers carried the dead

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Skan out. "Look at that, a good slave lost to those devils out there. Ifs just as well Browntooth got taken. I'd gut him myself if he was here, screaming and yelling like that."

Auma rubbed a paw across her bleeding back. "Painted ones, I've never heard of them before."

"Quiet back there!"

Slagar paced the slave line. "You lot can have a long rest. Ifs too late to cross the river now, we'll have to wait until tomorrow night. Right, Stonefleck?"

The rat strung his bow. Selecting an arrow from his quiver, he poked it through a gap in the boughs which covered the trench and fired straight up into the night sky. The arrow gave a shrieking whistle as it sped upward.

There was a moment's silence, then an answering whistle from an arrow fired on the other side of the river. Stonefleck unstrung his bow.

"Tomorrow night, Slagar, my rats will be waiting."

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Baby Rollo screamed. The raven had him tight by the nightshirt, and he wailed in terror as the big bird tugged and pulled, shaking its head fiercely from side to side.

Cornflower and Mrs. Churchmouse momentarily froze with horror at the awful sight.

But not little Sister May. She went immediately into action. Rushing to the stairs, she sprang up and grabbed baby Rollo, at the same time sinking her teeth into the raven's foot, which she bit clear through to the bone.

The bird promptly let go of his prize. He gave a loud, agonized squawk and fell flat upon the stairs. Rollo yowled, Sister May screamed, and they both rumbled down the spiral staircase. Cornflower and Mrs. Church-mouse dived in. Clutching Sister May and little Rollo, they hurried downstairs towards Cavern Hole, all four shouting aloud:

"Help! Help! Strangers in the Abbey! Help!"

Like a great grey furred juggernaut, Constance came bounding out of Cavern Hole, closely followed by Winifred the otter, John Churchmouse and Foremole.

Between them, the three mice gasped out the story of what had happened. Rollo had got over the fright quickly. He kept pointing a chubby paw over his back to

show them all the tear in his nightshirt where the big bird had seized it.

Constance wasted no time. She got the little group safely back to Cavern Hole and issued emergency orders.

"Brother Trugg, sound the alarm bells. Winifred, Ambrose, Foremole, Brother Sedge, gather staves and light some torches. We must find out more about this strange bird. Cornflower, tell the Abbot where we have gone. The rest of you, stay down here. Don't go wandering off alone."

Torches shone on the darkened spiral stairway as Constance led the party. They had searched the dormitories, the sick bay and all the first-floor passages, and were now on the second-floor staircase which led to tiie gallery overlooking Great Hall. Foremole went snuffling along

to an old side staircase, a straight flight which ran up to the disused chambers on the east wing of the third floor. He held up a paw and called out, "Yurr, over yurr. Lookit oi found."

A faint trace of bloodspecks spattered the bottom steps. Constance held up a torch to investigate.

The shadows leapt back to reveal a large raven standing on the top stair, together with a crow and six rooks. Boldly the badger climbed the stairs until she stood one step below the intruders.

"Who are you and what are you doing in our Abbey?" Constance demanded, never one to mince words.

The crow strutted forward imperiously. "I am Mangiz *he Seer, General Ironbeak's strong right wing. Bow your head and show proper respect when you speak to me, stripedog."

Constance promptly batted Mangiz beak over tail-feathers in one mighty sweep of her powerful forepaw, then with a roar she charged in among the rooks.

Ironbeak and his fighters retaliated instantly. They were on Constance, pecking, scratching and tearing.

Winifred and Ambrose ran to her rescue. Belaboring furiously, they whacked away at anything feathered with their stout staves.

The fight did not last long. Ironbeak and his fighters were driven back by the fast onslaught of the Redwallers. They retreated to a boxroom, slamming the door and locking it from the inside.

Constance shook blood from her muzzle as she banged on the door. "You in there, Ironbeak or whatever you call yourself, get out of this Abbey and take your birds with you. We do not allow trespassers at Redwall."

The reply was instant and bold. "YuggaW I am General Ironbeak, greatest fighter in all the northlands. This is my redstone house, and I will slay you all if you do not leave."

The Abbot came hurrying up, accompanied by Brother Dan and Sister Agnes. He motioned Constance to be silent. Though the badger was obviously fuming with temper she bowed to the Abbofs wish.

The old mouse rapped lightly on the door. "Hello in there. I am Mordalfus, Abbot of Redwall. I'm sorry if there's been a misunderstanding. We mean you no harm, we are a friendly order of creatures. If you wish to stay the night then you may. We have food and treatment for any creature who is sick or injured. Hello, can you hear me?"

This time it was Mangiz the crow who replied. "General Ironbeak's word is the law. This place is his now. We are in your roof spaces, and there are many of us, all seasoned warriors from the north. There were some sparrows when we arrived, but they have all been slain. You too will be slain if you do not leave the redstone house."

The Abbot shook his head sadly as Constance pulled him gently away. Foremole struck the door with his staff. "Yurr, burdbags, Redwall be ours. Better wurriers than you'm 'as rroid to take it offen us an' failed mizzuble, so they 'ave."

There was no sound from the other side of the door.

Winifred shouldered her stave. "Sounds as if they've gone. We'd best get back to Cavern Hole and decide what we are going to do."

There was a loud hubbub and clamor in Cavern Hole, and sleep was forgotten. Sister May was the heroine of the hour after Cornflower and Mrs. Churchmouse told how she attacked the big bird single-pawed to rescue Rollo.

Sister May was a simple and modest mouse. "Well, mercy me, I may be only the infirmary Sister, but I couldn't let that great bully harm our Rollo," she told them. "Poor little mite, he

was frightened clear out of his wits, and so was I. Do you know, I'm still not sure it was me who attacked that bird."

There was general laughter and a rousing cheer for Sister May.

Foremole and Constance were whispering together in a corner when the Abbot banged a wooden bowl upon the tabletop.

"Quiet. Quiet, please! Well, eight seasons of peace since the Great War and now one summer strewn with trouble. First the fox and his band, now this!"

Several voices called out.

"If only Matthias were here!"

"Yes, he'd know what to do!"

r "Matthias, Basil and Jess would soon sort those birds out!"

mump!

- Constance's heavy paw shook the table. "Silence, listen to your Abbot!" she ordered.

Foremole raised a paw. "'scuse oi, me an moi moles got wurk f do. May us be 'scused, zurr?" i The Abbot looked over the top of his spectacles. "Certainly, Foremole. Now, the rest of you listen to me. , Wherever Matthias is now, or Jess Squirrel, or Basil, I'm IBM they would wish us to get on with this problem and help ourselves."

There was a murmur of agreement.

Abbot Mordalfus continued his address;

"Thank you. I must say a word regarding Sister May. What she did tonight was very brave"

"Aye 'twas that/' Ambrose Spike piped up. "Maybe she's after our Warrior's job instead of mindin' that old infirmary."

Sister May blushed to her whiskertips. "Oh, what a naughty thing to say, Mr. Spike!"

When order was restored, the Abbot continued:

"Perhaps Ambrose is right, maybe we do need a Warrior in a situation like this. Can anyone suggest a suitable candidate?"

The call was unanimous:

"Constance, Constance!"

The badger stood up. "First, I suggest you afl bed down here for the night. It doesn't look too sate up in the dormitories at the moment. If you must leave Cavern Hole, let Winifred or Ambrose know. Do not wander about alone, especially out in the open. I will sleep on the steps between here and Great Hall tonight. Tomorrow we'll decide what to do about the raven and his crew."

There was a great bustle of activity. Some of the infants thought it great fun to be sleeping in Cavern Hole and they made blanket tents from the edge of the table to the floor.

Constance sat on the steps with the Abbot and Ambrose.

"What do you make of all this, Constance?"

"I'm at a bit of a loss to say. Abbot. They must have been watching the Abbey, because they wouldn't have found it so easy to occupy the roofspaces with Queen Warbeak and all her warriors at home."

"Aye, now if s up to us to make 'em see the error of their ways and send 'em packin', gurt cheeky birds."

In the roofspace, General Ironbeak held a conference with Mangiz.

"Krah! The big stripedog is dangerous, Ironbeak."

"The hedgepig and the waterhound too. We underestimated these earthcrawlers, Mangiz. They will have to be taught a lesson."

"Aye, tomorrow will be their dying day/' vowed the crow. "Oh, you are bleeding, my General."

Ironbeak was glad he had been alone when Sister May attacked him. It would not do for his fighters to see their leader vanquished by a small female mouse. He shook Wood from his talon.

"Yaah! It is nothing, a scratch. As you say, my Mangiz, tomorrow will be the dying day of these earthcrawlers. Post sentries at the eaves, and watch for Quickbill and his brothers bringing in supplies."

Dawn was long past at the foot of the high cliffs. Matthias and the searchers had reached the cliffs after dark, and ever since daybreak they ranged far and wide. Everywhere they were faced with sheer inward curving expanses; nowhere was there a way up to the plateau. It was just before mid morn ing when Matthias sat on a small mound with Basil and Cheek. The old hare shook his ears mournfully.

"Bollywoggled. Thafs what we are, old lad, flum-micated! Blow me, there's no way to the top of that cliff unless we sprout wings."

"We need a big ladder. Thaf d be better than wings," Cheek sniggered impudently and ducked Basil's paw.

Jabez Stump marched up with a huge brown owl waddling behind him. "Matthias, meet Sir 'Arry the Muse."

The owl bowed gravely and blinked his enormous eyes.

Matthias bowed courteously in return. "Good morning, Sir Harry. I am called Matthias, Warrior of Redwall, this young otter is Cheek, by name and nature. Last but Hot least, allow me to present Basil Stag Hare, retired scout and foot fighter."

Basil made an elegant leg. "Ah y'service, sah. But why are you called the Muse?" The owl struck an artistic stance.

"Why, pray, do you suppose?

I'm master of poetry and prose,

No equal have I in field or wood/

No creature a smidgeon, a fraction as good.

And if you need a poet, why, here's one to choose.

This Owl. ... Sir Harry the Muse."

"Oh bravo! Bravo sir, well said!" Basil applauded him loudly.

Matthias leaned on his sword. "Well said indeed. Unfortunately, we are not looking for a poet at die moment. Sir Harry."

The owl blinked in a dignified manner.

"Then tell me what you need.

Someone to perform a deed?

A mummer perhaps, or a singer of songs?

A champion, a lighter of wrongs?

A companion, maybe, to stand at your side?

For my talents are varied and wide."

"We're looking for some creature who's too modest for words, haha." Cheek anticipated Basil's paw this time, and dodged to one side.

Matthias nodded towards the difftop. "We need someone who can get us up there."

Sir Harry preened his feathers, averting his eyes from Matthias. "Cake, have you any cake?"

"You didn't talk in rhyme then. gt;Vhy?" Matthias smiled,

"Because this is business. Verse is for conversation and pleasantry. Business is business, straight speaking."

Matthias spread his paws, opening his eyes wide in imitation of the owl.

"Business for goodness sake, Perhaps we can find some cake. Maybe, my friend, we will bring to you A shrewcake baked by a shrew."

At first Sir Harry looked undecided, then he stamped his talons and clacked his hooked beak in approval.

"Not bad, not bad at all. At least it made me smile. For a Warrior, I'd say quite good, You have a certain style."

Matthias sheathed his sword. "Wait here, sir. I'll be back in a short while, then we can talk business."

The warrior mouse set off in search of Log-a-Log and his shrews.

Basil cleared his throat noisily and faced Sir Harry.

"I beg you listen to me.

I'm a fellow spirit, you see.

I was once considered a champion poet.

I just thought you'd like to know it. . . ."

Cheek tittered and avoided Basil's paw in the same instant. Sir Harry turned his back and delivered a cutting line:

"I beg, I implore you, sir, Stick to being a hare!"

Basil twiddled his ears huffily. "Hmph! Some chaps wouldn't know a rhyme if you chopped it up and served it with custard in a bowl. Stick to being a hare, huh!"

Matthias reappeared with Log-a-Log. The shrew leader Was carrying a flat white cake, its sides oozed honey, and dark specks at its middle were definitely some kind of dried fruit baked into it. He presented it to Sir Harry. . The owl looked it over dubiously. He pecked at the

cake, made small noises of approval, then gobbled it up greedily. Crumbs of shrewcake still dung to his beak as he nodded in satisfaction.

"Excellent! Didn't look like much, but it tasted wonderful. How many more of these have you got?"

Matthias shrugged. "As many as it takes. The Guosim are good cooks. All they need is a small fire, a thin slab of rock and their own ingredients. But first I want to know more about that plateau. Is there a way up?"

"Of course there is," Sir Harry snorted, spraying crumbs over Cheek. "Nothing moves around here that I don't know about. I watched the fox and his band taking a slave line up there yesterday. There are rope ladders on the top. They pulled them up so you couldn't follow. How many shrewcakes in a batch?"

"Eighteen," Log-a-Log told him.

"That many? Good! I'll fly up and drop the ladders down, but don't ask me to do any more. I stay well clear of the toplands normally. If s a strange world, too much death."

Sir Harry did a short ungainly run and took off into graceful flight. He cirded and wheeled, then flew up to theclifftop.

Log-a-Log called the shrews together, issuing orders to the two on cooking duty. Basil and Matthias marshalled the rest into lines ready for the ascent.

Jess Squirrel watched the top anxiously. "Look out, stand back, here come the rope ladders," she reported.

Bumping and unfurling their way down the cliff face, the twin ladders unravelled, stopping just short of the place where Cheek stood.

Jess sprang on to one, scuttling up with all the agility of a champion climber, calling out as she went. "Wait there. I'll go to the top and make sure all is secure."

Sir Harry came winging down. He stood counting the shrewcakes as the cooks laid them on the grass to cool. Satisfied the total was correct, he turned to Matthias.

"Our business is concluded, You've paid me what I'm due. The journey ahead is perilous. Good

fortune go with you."

Jess waved all clear from the top. Matthias and Log-a-Log mounted the rope ladders and began to climb.

"Good luck and good earing to you. Sir Harry," the warrior mouse called back. "I hope we meet again." The poetic owl bit into a shrewcake. He burned his tongue on the hot liquid honey but carried on eating and muttering,

"Those that venture upward, Are only the brave and insane. Though I hate to predict. From the path that you've picked, I doubt that we'll meet again."

Matthias was too far up the rope ladder to hear. He was intent on reaching the plateau, regardless of what lay in store.

Foremole and his crew erected a barrier across the corridor next to the first-floor dormitory. The industrious creatures had brought lots of special mole equipment with them, and they began laying a surprise for any intruders who ventured down the spiral staircase towards the barricade. Foremole smiled and chuckled as he supervised.

"Yurr, Jarge, lay it on good'n'eavy across yon stairs. Rooter, you'm sprinkle aplenty stonedust o'er the top. Hurr, slap 'er on, Gaffer, doant be stingy with it. Ho arr, oi'd dearly loik to see anybeast put paw or daw atop o' that liddle lot."

Shaking with glee, the moles stood back to admire their work. The bottom six steps had been liberally smeared and coated with a thick layer of Blackmole Tunnel Grease and Rockslide Burgoo mixture, a combination which often proved invaluable to tunnelling moles when they encountered immovable stones. Over the top of this was sprinkled a fine layer of sandstone dust. To the casual eye it looked exactly like a normal sandstone stair. Fine blackened tripwires had been stretched across the stairwell on the seventh and eighth steps. Immediately in front of the barrier, facing the stairs, two green saplings were fixed in wall torch

brackets, bent back and held by a restraining rope, between them was tied an old blanket loaded with a mixture of stones, soil and a special vegetable compound, mainly stinkwort and wild garlic pounded together with dogs mercury plant.

Foremole covered his nose as he patted the huge catapult gently. "Ahurr hurr, we'm woant 'ave to lissen for 'em after mis!"

Rooter wiped tears of merriment from his eyes. "Boi 'okey we woant, ee'll smell 'em a gudd day's march off, hurt hurr."

Outside on the grass in front of the Abbey, Constance was covering for the mole activities with a decoy. Any creature who could twirl a sling or fire an arrow was brought out to help.

Ironbeak and Mangiz had come out onto the bell tower roof with some rooks. They basked in the warm morning sun, watching the pathetic attempts of the fighting squads below.

Ambrose Spike marched up and down in fine military fashion with baby Rollo in tow twirling a tiny sling.

"Right, troops, here's the drill. I want to see how many decent archers and slingthrowers we can raise. . . ."

Baby Rollo echoed the last words of each phrase. "Flingthrowers'e can raise. . . ."

"Now, when I give the command, fire and sling away at the bell tower. But mind, keep an eye on those missiles. What goes up must come down."

"Go up mus' come down."

"Be careful you don't get a stone on your head or an arrow in your paw!"

"Narrow in y'paw!"

"Just a moment, Sister May. Point that arrow the other way, please, marm, otherwise you'll end up shooting yourself in the nose."

"Shooten inner noses!"

Ambrose raised his paw. "Redwall defence volunteers. Ready, aim ... fire!"

Most of the stones and arrows did not go even a quarter of the way up the bell tower. They fell short, clattering off the solid masonry of Redwall Abbey.

General Ironbeak was amused at the puny efforts of the creatures below. He sat enjoying the spectacle while his birds danced jibingly upon the roof, cawing and cackling insultingly.

"YaWa. Hey, earthcrawlers, we're up here!"

"Qnvhawhaw! What a bunch of ninnies."

"Look at that old mouse, he's slung himself on his back!"

"Cahaha! Please shoot me. Look, I'm standing with my wings spread to make an easy target."

"Rakkachak! See that baby mouse, he tossed a rock up and it came down right between his ears!"

Ironbeak paced the stone guttering, hopping neatly on to a gargoyle spout.

"Fools! Why do they waste their energy like this, Mangiz?"

"Who knows, my General. Maybe it is anger at the death of the sparrows which drives them to do this."

"Ha, idiots! Some too young, others too old, none trained in the way of the warrior."

"True, Ironbeak. There is only the big stripedog who is dangerous. How can they hope to defeat us like this?"

"Kaah! You worry too much, Mangiz. Let them waste their energy. It is a fine summer day and the sun will grow hotter. We will stay here and let them try to redouble their efforts. When they are tired out, we will strike. I have a plan. Listen, my fighters. When you see me spread my wings, then dive as fast as you can and go in pairs. Kill if you must, but try to pick one or two up. I want to see what the others do if we are holding some of them hostages. Maybe then they will see it is no use trying to defy General Iron"

Bong! Boom! Clang! Bonggggggg/

The Matthias and Methuselah bells directly beneath

the bell tower roof tolled out vigorously. The noise was deafening to Ironbeak and his birds, separated from the bells by only a single layer of slates. Taken completely off guard, they flapped off in all directions, cawing loudly.

Below in the belfry. Cornflower and Mrs. Churchmouse heaved and tugged furiously on the bellropes, their paws leaving the floor at each recoil. Bongdingboomclangbangbong!!!

Ironbeak was last to leave the roof. He tried calling to his warriors, but his voice was lost in the clanging melee. With his head resounding to the metallic cacophony through to his very beaktip, the raven flapped off heavily into the air.

John Churchmouse clapped Ambrose upon the back.

'That'll teach 'em to laugh at our army, eh, my old Spike!"

Constance opened the Abbey door. "Come on inside, I'm dosing the door now, I hope we gave Foremole and his crew time to set their surprise up."

With his head still ringing from the bells, Ironbeak flew under the eaves to the roofspace in a black rage.

"Mangiz, take four with you and see if you can pick up any lone stragglers outside. The rest of you follow me. Get that roof trapdoor open quickly. We'll fly inside to the upper gallery and beat them to the stairs."

"Beat what chairs. Chief?"

The crow had not recovered his hearing properly. Ironbeak buffeted him flat with a hefty wing blow.

"I said 'beat them to the stairs,' antbrain. Now get that trapdoor up and follow me."

Halfway across Great Hall, Abbot Mordalfus bumped into Constance. The badger glanced up. "Dust!" she exclaimed. "They're opening up the ceiling

trapdoor. Quick, clear the Hall. Let* s get upstairs. By the way, Abbot, well done with the bells."

As they pounded up the stairs, the Abbot called to Constance. "I thought the bells were your idea. I knew nothing of it until I heard them ringing."

"Well, whoever it was, they struck just the right note, hahaha."

Both parties reached the barricade area at virtually the same time. The Red wallers stopped behind the barricade. Ironbeak could not fly on the spiral stairwell, so he came hop-skipping round the stairs in front of his fighters and hit the first tripwire.

Unable to stop himself and being jostled from behind, he injured his dignity and his bottom by hying to pull back and slipping heavily upon the grease. It was utter confusion, feathers, beaks, claws and wings massed in an insane jumble as the warrior birds tried to stay upright on the curving stairway. They slithered and bumped, slid and collided, slipped and cracked wings, talons and heads together. Black slimy grease pounded into a gritty porridge and the stonedust was everywhere. Each time a bird tried to regain its balance the situation worsened. "Yggah, leggo, you're pulling me over!" "Gerroff, you're all slimy . . . whoops!" "Yafcfairr.' You're breakin' me wing!" "Get your greasy claws off me. Take that!" "Yugg, muy beaksh fulluv greash!"

On the other side of the barrier, the Redwallers danced with glee. They imitated the scorn the birds had heaped on them from the bell tower roof. "Cawhawhaw, what a bunch of ninnies!" "Whaf s the matter, can't you stand on your own two

legs!" "I'll say he can't, his pal's standing on them for him.

Ha ha!" "Ho ho! Come and get.us, we're over here, it's not far

to walk."

"Yurr, 'ello, greasybeak, 'ow do you loik a taste o' molegrease?" Foremole waved a sharp knife aloft. "Geodown flat naow, gennelbeasts, yurr she goo's!"

He severed the catapult rope with a single slash.

Chaos was added to confusion.

The huge slingload shot forward, flattening birds who were trying to stand. Rocks, soil and rotting vegetable matter pounded in a torrent upon the floundering birds. The evil-smelling compound enveloped them.

Completely defeated, the birds slithered messily up the stairwell. Ironbeak tried to spit the evil concoction out as he thudded and bumped his way up, sometimes slipping back a stair, often falling heavily against the walls. All around him his warriors suffered the same predicament. Floundering, cursing and skidding, they beat an ignominious retreat, with the laughter of the Redwallers ringing in their heads.

"Hahaha, wash that little lot off."

"Hope you've got a birdbath up there, hohoho!"

"Heeheehee, I suspect foul play!"

Ironbeak supported himself against the wall.

"Yaggah! You've signed your death warrants," he threatened. "The moment you set paw outside, we'll be waiting on the rooftops. You will be slain without mercy."

"Yah, go and boil your beak. General Pongo!"

It was a long hot day in the crowded trench. The sun's rays baked through the covering of

boughs as slaves and slavers alike tossed and turned in the cramped conditions. Only Stonefleck sat calm and motionless. Slagar wiped his paw round under the silken face mask.

"If it gets any hotter, we'll roast. Maybe we should have tried to cross the river before dawn, eh, rat?"

"You would have been caught out on the open water in daylight. That means death."

Slagar scratched moodily in the sandy soil. "Your mob /jt had better be ready as soon as the sun sets."

Stonefleck's expression did not change. "They will be."

Mattimeo moved restlessly in his sleep. Dreams of the dark forest they had left echoed through his mind.

Matthias and his friends ate as they marched across the plateau with the shrews. Log-a-Log pointed out the slavers' tracks.

"Nice and clear, still travelling due south."

Orlando's face was grim. "Aye, the fox didn't suppose we'd be following him."

Basil shaded his eyes. "I say, that looks like a gloomy old forest we're heading towards. Any more shrewcake left?"

Jess absentmindedly passed him one. "It's a pine wood. I don't like the look of it."

"Nor do I," Jabez Stump agreed. "Just a feelin' in my spikes, I s'pose, but it looks as if if s sittin' there a-waitin' for us."

Cheek laughed nervously. "Ha ha, old doom'n'gloom. Funny, I haven't got a feelin' in my spikes. Maybe 'cos I don't have any."

Basil slapped him heartily on the back. "Thaf s the spirit, Cheek m'boy. Chin in, chest out, good straight back and a stiff upper lip, wot. Look out, pine trees, here we come!" The woods looked deceptively dose. Even though they stepped out briskly, it was past noon when the party arrived at the beginning of the pine fringe.

Log-a-Log called for cooks to make a meal. "We'll eat and rest awhile here, because we won't be stopping once we get among those trees; we'll do a straight march through until we're dear of them. Is that all right with you, Matthias?"

"Good idea, Log-a-Log. A rest and some food will set us up nicely and we'll be fresh for the march."

A short while later they formed up into dose marching order. Weapons at the ready, they set off into the trees

with Log-a-Log and Matthias up front, while Orlando and Basil guarded the rear. The first thing that struck them was the absence of daylight filtering through the thick foliage of the dose-growing pines, then the complete, awesome silence of the place.

"No use trying to look for tracks among these thick pine needles on the ground. And that strong scent from the trees blocks out everything." Log-a-Log's voice was muted and hollow.

"Waaah! Look, up there!"

Log-a-Log grabbed the wide-eyed shrew who had called out.

"What are you shouting about?"

"Skeletons, bones. Can't you see them hanging in the trees? It's a warning. We'd better go back!"

Orlando came rushing forward. "Bones are bones, shrew. Nobeast is turning back. They can't bite you, see."

The badger whirled his axe and crashed it with stunning force deep into a tree trunk. The reverberation of the mighty Mow caused bones to come clattering down to earth. Orlando tugged his warblade free.

"Dead bones never harmed anybeast. Now get marching."

Suddenly a series of ear-splitting screams pierced the stillness and the trees about them began shaking as if moved by a mighty wind. Several shrews fell, cut down by sharp wooden lances. Matthias dodged to one side as a lance buried itself in the ground by him.

"Help! Heeeeelp!" Cheek gave a strangled cry and began rising swiftly into the trees, hauled up on a thin braided noose looped expertly around his body.

Log-a-Log acted swiftly. He fitted a stone to his sling. Whirling it, he loosed it among the lower branches. A

mall thin creature painted all over with green and black vegetable dyes fell senseless to the earth. The trees were

five with hundreds of other creatures, chattering and

creaming, swinging nooses and jabbing downward

with sharp wooden lances. Basil plucked up a fallen spear and hurled it back.

Matthias crouched, drawing his sword, as Jess Squirrel bounded up. "Jess, they're some kind of treedimbers. Can't you do anything?"

"The little savages, they don't seem to have any language, just screaming and growling. There's hundreds of 'em, Matthias, and they mean to kill us."

The warrior mouse swung his blade at one of the painted ones who had ventured too low.

"Worst thing we could do is to make a run for it. Besides, they've got Cheek. The shrews are holding them off with slingstones, but that won't last."

Orlando thundered past them, roaring. He struck trees left and right with his axe, jarring the savage beasts out of the branches. Shrew daggers made short work of them, but for every painted one that fell it seemed there were ten to take its place. The air rang with the snapping of branches and the screams of the painted horde. Above it all, Cheek could be heard sobbing loudly, "Help! Save me, Basil. Don't leave me. Heeeelp!"

The old hare was leaping and kicking out with his long dangerous limbs. Anybeast that got too dose was knocked out instantly.

"Chin up. Cheek old lad, I'm doin' me best!" he called encouragingly.

Amid the rain of javelins that hissed down and the stones that whizzed up into the pines, Jess Squirrel's teeth began to chatter madly. Her eyes grew red with battle light and she was far bigger than any of the strange attackers.

"Savages! Cannibals, tree freaks!" she shouted. "Here, Matthias, there's only one way to settle

this. I think I've spotted their leader, that little brute over there. Look at him screaming and dancing away tike a mad thing. He's sending another lot in against us. I'm sure, thafs the chief. Lend me your sword; there's only one thing this crazy tribe will understand."

Grabbing the sword, Jess swung skilfully aloft. She was like a dusty red streak of lightning. Any foebeast standing in her way was hacked aside. The painted leader saw her coming. He screamed at the others and pointed to Jess, but she bulled her way through, scattering the painted attackers like ninepins. The leader hesitated a second to see if she had been brought down. That second's wait cost him dear.

As he launched himself off the bough, Jess landed next to him. She seized him by the tail and hauled him roughly back. Grasping him by the ears, Jess gave a strong heave and held him kicking and dangling. Then she swung the sword in a glittering arc, shouting, "Redwall! Redwall!"

The savage chief, held fast by the ears with the great sword flashing in front of his eyes, gave one loud piercing squeal.

Immediately all activity halted.

The small green and black painted beasts crowded the branches and packed the boughs, uncertain of what to do. One or two of the bolder ones began edging forward, until Jess swung the sword as if to strike. The captive leader gave a series of angry screams, so they fell back and remained still.

Basil paced up and down, using a broken lance as a swagger stick. "Quick thinkin', Jess. That stopped the tittle devils. Y'deserve a mention in despatches for that, wot?"

Jess glared about her fiercely. "It wouldn't do any good mentioning any tiling to this horde of hooligans. They don't have any recognizable language; screams and squeals are their only way of communication. How do we get out of this? If s like having a serpent by the tail."

Basil turned to Matthias. "She's right, y*know. We're caught in a bloomin' old standoff. The moment she lets that chap go we'll have the whole silly tribe down on our heads."

Matthias had been thinking furiously. He whispered

to Log-a-Log before shouting up to Jess, "See if you can make them understand that we want to trade their leader for Cheek. Leave the rest to me. I've got an idea and with a bit of luck it might work."

Jess went into a series of mimes. She pointed at Cheek, then pointed to the ground. Holding the leader at paw's length, she let the sword hang loose by her side. The performance was repeated several times before the leader realized what she meant. Screeching and growling, he pointed at Cheek, then to himself.

"When they're both free, what then?" Orlando whispered to Matthias. "We've broken the standoff but they won't let us walk unharmed through their territory."

There was a clicking, scratching sound from the shrews surrounding Log-a-Log. Matthias watched anxiously until Log-a-Log winked at him. All was ready. Matthias took a deep breath.

"Stay dose together when we have to move. Try not to turn your backs on the painted tribe. Right, Jess, let their chief free. They're releasing Cheek."

The young otter scrambled free of the rope and made a hasty decent. Bumping and tripping, he half tell, half climbed, out of the tree.

Jess gave the leader a slight push and vaulted neatly down, returning the sword to Matthias.

There was a pause as the maddened creatures bunched to attack.

"Logalogalogalog!"

The shrew leader leapt forward with a blazing pine-wood torch in either paw, grinning and showing his teeth. He made as if to touch the heavy pines that oozed resin all round him.

For the first time, the painted ones showed fear. They chattered and screeched wildly, bounding high into the trees at the sight of fire. Log-a-Log shook the torches in their direction.

"Haha! Desperate measures call for desperate

remedies, my friends," he called. "You're frightened of the flames, aren't you? One move, and I'll burn your forest and you with it."

Matthias, Orlando and Basil started the column marching south.

"Come on, Log-a-Log," Matthias urged. "I think they understand what we mean. Jabez, Cheek, get those extra torches from the Guosim and stay close to Log-a-Log. Don't let the fire go out."

Backing and shuffling, they made their way southeast through the dark pinewoods, grateful for the light of the torches. Progress was slow. Matthias could not see the painted ones, but he knew they were in the trees above, following every step of the way.

Night had fallen by the time they had made their way out of the pines, to the shores of a great river. There was plenty of wood about at the forest edge, so Log-a-Log and his shrews made a huge bonfire, laying in a good supply of wood to last until dawn. The strange tribe of painted ones had retreated back into their pine forest, but Matthias took no chances. Sentries were posted. A meal was prepared, then they sat about on the bank, discussing the day's events, while deciding how to cross the river the next day.

Further south down the river, Mattimeo and his friends sat at the center of a huge log raft surrounded by slavers. Two thick ropes connected the ferry to the far shore.

Slagar watched them rise and dip in the waters. "Your rats pull strong and well, Stonefleck. We will soon be across."

The deadpan expression did not leave Stonefleck's face.

"I have more fighters at my command than leaves on

the trees, fox. Look behind you, on the shore over there.

" Your pursuers have made it through the pinewoods.

They must be brave and resourceful. We will see just

how brave on the morrow. My army could do with a bit of fun."

Slagar gazed into the darkened waters. "That's if they make it across the river!"

The confines of Cavern Hole became oppressive to John Churchmouse, although his wife actually enjoyed the close community, chatting with Cornflower and looking after baby Rollo, preparing breakfast with the Brothers and Sisters. John slipped out quietly, his recording books and pens in a satchel over his shoulder. He slid past Constance, who was sleeping on the stairs, crossed Great Hall and installed himself on a corner window ledge. It was a peaceful little niche where he often sat to write and morning sunlight flooded in, warming his face.

John opened his recording book as he gazed out at a corner of the orchard, watching three magpies flap off heavily until they were out of his vision.

By the fur! Those cheeky birds had a nerve. Occupying the Abbey roofspaces, and now filching supplies from the very orchard that the Redwallers tended so lovingly.

The mood for writing left John. He dosed the book and climbed down from the sill. Help would be needed in the kitchens.

There was a disturbance at the top of the stairs between Great Hall and Cavern Hole. John broke into a run, the satchel bumping at his side. The crow they called Mangjz bowled him flat as he flapped off into the air towards the upper galleries.

Constance blundered into John and tripped. She sat up, shaking her paw at the bird.

"Scum, kidnapper, you filthy brute!" she shouted.

John stood up, dusting his habit off. "What's happened, Constance? What is the matter?"

"Bad news, I'm afraid, John. You'd better come down into Cavern Hole. This concerns you."

The Churchmouse followed the badger anxiously.

The creatures who were up and about gathered round Constance as she flung three scraps of material down upon the table.

"Look at this!"

The Abbot picked them up. "Scraps of material. What are they?"

Constance ground her teeth together angrily. "Pieces of Cornflower and Mrs. Churchmouse's aprons and a fragment of baby Rollo's little habit. They've been captured by the birds."

Abbot Mordalfus shook his head in disbelief. "Impossible. Surely they were here last night, weren't they? Did anybeast see them?"

Foremole shrugged. "Ma/ap, but maybe not. Oi niver thought of a-looken for 'em."

John Churchmouse dashed his satchel to the floor. "My wife, captured by those filthy birds. Where have they got her?"

He made a dash for the stairs and was stopped by Winifred and Ambrose. The Churchmouse struggled furiously.

"Let me go, there's no telling what those murdering savages will do to her!"

"John Churchmouse, be still!" ordered Mordalfus. "Come and sit by this table, sir. Come on, do as I say. You aren't doing anybeast a bit of good behaving like mis. Let us hear what Constance has to say."

John looked up in suprise. It was seldom that the Abbot spoke harshly to any creature. The fight went out of him and he allowed Ambrose to lead him to a chair.

Mordalfus turned to the badger. "Constance, tell us all you know of this incident, please."

"Father Abbot, there's not a lot to tell, I'm afraid. Yesterday Cornflower and Mrs. Churchmouse were in the bell tower. Rollo must have joined them later. Well, when I called all the creatures in and shut the Abbey door

I musfve locked them out. They probably didn't hear me calling. There's no entrance to the Abbey from the bell tower, so they must have tried later to cross the grounds. Those birds caught them in the open. The crow said that they took them to the roofspaces. General

Ironbeak wants to see us outside at noon."

Sitting in a corner of the dimly lit roofspace. Cornflower and Mrs. Churchmouse tried to make themselves as unobtrusive as possible, keeping baby Rollo quiet and still. General Ironbeak and his birds had returned from their dust bath on the path outside RedwalL It had done little good, and in the end they had resorted to wallowing in the brackish ditchwater to rid themselves of the sludge which dung to their feathers. It was not a great improvement; the stench still dung to them.

Ironbeak glared ferociously at his captives. "Yaggah! You and your friends will pay dearly for this insult."

Cornflower covered baby Rollo with her torn apron. "You great bully/ you deserve all you got!"

Mangiz had not been caught by the trap on the stairway, and he stayed slightly apart from his General, turning his beak to avoid the unpleasant odor.

"Kraah! Silence, mouse! At noon you will get all you deserve. You should be pleading with the mighty Ironbeak to spare your miserable lives."

Mrs. Churchmouse eyed the crow with distaste. "We would never grovel to ruffians like you. Slay us if you want, but you wiD never conquer Redwall Abbey."

"Brave words are like empty eggshells. You will beg when the time comes," Mangiz predicted.

Rollo peered out from under the apron.

"Gen'ral Pongo!" he said, making a face.

"Silence! Keep that small one quiet or we will kill him now."

"Oh, shut your beak, you coward!" Cornflower called out indignantly. "Killing infants is probably about all you scavengers are good for."

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Mangiz was about to reply when Ironbeak silenced him.

"Mangiz, enough. We do not argue with mousewives."

Mrs. Churchmouse rummaged in her apron pocket and found some dried fruit she had been using in the kitchens. She gave it to baby Rollo and sat with her paw about him.

"I wish your Matthias were back, he'd know what to do," she whispered.

"He certainly would, but don't worry, your John and Constance and the Abbot will see we come to no harm. It's Rollo I'm concerned about. They can do what they like with me, as long as they don't harm a hair on that baby's head."

Mrs. Churchmouse stroked Rollo's tiny ears. "Yes, Mess him. CXyou remember when your Mattimeo was this size? My Tim and Tess weren't much older, and they were a trio of rascals, I can tell you."

Cornflower smiled. "Aye, but we had happy times with them. I hope, wherever they are now, that they're safe and well."

"They'll all come marching back up that road one fine day, I know it. Then the enemies of our Abbey will rue the day they were born."

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Stonefleck's army was indeed a large one. Mattimeo had never seen so many rats. They

swarmed through the bushes, trees and hillocks of the far shore, efficient and silent. Every rat carried a bow and arrows, and they gathered in groups, each under a leader who took his orders from Stonefleck the commander. The captives were secured among the trees, but Mattimeo could still see the river. He sat with Tim and Auma, listening to Stonefleck and Slagar conversing.

"Let us see if your pursuers can make it across the river, Slagar. They are a determined band, but they have not met my longtail army yet. All they have had to contend with is a few slavers."

"I have a slave line to worry about," the Cruel One sniffed. "Open warfare is not my business. Besides, you have a mighty army."

"Aye, and every one of them an expert archer. I could deal with those woodlanders using only a quarter of my force."

"Huh, then why don't you?" Slagar challenged him.

"Because I never leave anything to chance. Are you going to stay and watch, just to make sure your enemies get slain?"

"No, I will carry on south. If your army is as good as

you boast, I should have no need to worry about being followed. Threedaws! Form them up into line, we've got a full day's march ahead."

Mattimeo and his companions were jostled and prodded by Vitch. "Say goodbye to your father and his friends, Mattimeo, they will be dead creatures before this day is through," the rat taunted him.

The young mouse did not allow himself to be baited by Vitch, even though his heart sank at the thought of his father and the rest being caught out on the open water by tiie huge rat

army that lay in wait on the shore of the river. He took a deep breath and smiled carelessly at the undersized rat.

"Your master Slagar could not kill my father, neither will Stonefleck and his vermin. The Warrior of Redwall has proved himself before now against rat armies, and he will live to free us. When that day comes, you and I have a score to settle. I'll be looking for you, Vitch."

As they were herded away through the trees, Mattimeo allowed himself one last backward glance at the far shore beyond the river shimmering in the morning sunlight. Though he could not see his father, he murmured under his breath, "Martin keep him safe!"

The sounds of axe and sword had been ringing through tile pine fringe since dawn. Many of the trees at the edge had not been able to take proper root in the loose sandy soil of the banks, and some were only half grown. Orlando swung his mighty axe with long, powerful strokes, often felling a tree so that it took one of its weaker neighbors down with it. Matthias had cast his habit aside. He slashed and hacked at the branches of each felled tree, trimming it so that Cheek, Basil, Jess and Jabez could roll it down to where Log-a-Log was in charge of raft construction.

"Flugg, bring those ropes over here/' Log-a-Log ordered. "Gurn, soak that moss well and mix it with soil;

I want good caulking that won't leak. Garr, I need that trunk over here. You others, help him."

There was little the Guosim leader did not know about watercraft. Log-a-Log was a ferry shrew, the son of ferry shrews. He watched the flow of the river, pointing out his course to Basil.

"We'll take a wide sweep upriver, then I'll bring about in midwater and land us on the other shore somewhere about there, see? That way we'll be going due south again."

Basil dipped one ear. "Aye, aye, Cap'n, as you say. Bear in mind, old feller, that I wasn't cut out for a nautical career. I'll have to have a substantial meal first. No use bein' watersick on an empty tummy, wot?"

It was early noontide before the raft lay completed in the shallows. Log-a-Log folded his paws 'and shook his head.

"Bit rough, Matthias. Best I could do at short notice."

Matthias passed him apples and shrewcake. "She's a stout raft, Log-a-Log. I couldn't ask for better. I know you'll use all your skills to get us safely across. What are you so worried about, young Cheek?"

The otter stroked his dry nose. "If s er, well, er, d'you see. . . . Well, if s the water, Matthias. I've always been a bit frightened of it. Oh, the odd stream and woodland pool aren't too bad, but look at the size of that old river. I never saw anything so big and fast-flowing in Moss-flower."

Basil flung an apple core into the river. "Haw haw! Well I've heard everythin' now, a bally otter who's frightened of rivers. Curl my whiskers, thaf s a good un."

"Now, now, Basil," Jess chided the scoffing hare, "you're not too fond of the water yourself. If s bad form to make fun of another creature who feels the same."

Basil relented and flung a paw around Cheek. "Righto, point taken, Jess. Here, young otter m'lad, what say you and I stay together in the middle of the raft? We can hang

on to each other and get into a fine old blue funk together, eh?"

Jabez Stump trundled aboard the raft. "Ah well, we can't hang about here all day. There's a river to cross. You comin' aboard. Warrior?"

Matthias sheathed his sword and leapt onto the floating logs. "Keep your heads down when

we reach the other side. No telling whaf s waiting over there," he warned.

Log-a-Log grasped the forked branch which served as a tiller. "All aboard! Cast off on shore, poles ready riverward, bring her round. Steady as she goes, we're under way!"

The raft bobbed and swayed out into the current. Blue waters reflecting the skies above rushed and danced to white foamy peaks spraying into the breeze.

The eyes of Stonefleck's rat army watched eagerly from the far bank as the little craft started its journey towards them.

General Ironbeak landed skilfully on the path in front of the main Abbey door. He tucked his wings away neatly, parading up and down with a swaggering gait.

The door swung open, and Constance and the Abbot stepped outside, followed by John Churchmouse. The Abbot nodded civilly.

"Good afternoon. Do you wish to go inside?"

Ironbeak cocked his head on one side, eyeing them boldly. "Yflggar.' What I have to say can be said out here, earthcrawlers. I hold the upper claw today. Maybe if you had killed my fighters and me on the stairs yesterday, instead of playing your silly little games, you would have been the victors. It is too late now; we meet on my terms."

Mordalfus tucked his paws into the wide habit sleeves. "Then speak. What is it you want of us?"

"Complete surrender, old mouse!"

"I am sorry, but that is impossible," the Abbot replied.

"Nothing is impossible if you hold dear the lives of your creatures."

"We have lost Brothers and Sisters before now."

"Aye, but that would have been without choice," the General pointed out. "Step forward a bit and look up to the rooftop of this redstone house."

The three friends walked out onto the path. Shading their eyes, they looked up.

Ironbeak gave a harsh cry and waved one wing.

The three captives were forced to the roof e4ge, where they could be seen. John Churchmouse groaned aloud. Constance stood dose to him and whispered, "Courage, John. We'll get them back for you. Trust your Abbot, let him do the talking."

The tiny figures high above swayed in the breeze, skirts billowing out as they kept hold of baby Rollo, who was waving cheerily.

"Karra! High, isn't it." General Ironbeak preened his wing feathers as he spoke. "Oh, not to a bird, but to an earthcrawler it is as if your head were bumping the clouds. If s a long way down too, if you don't hit the sides or bounce off a few gutters. Who knows, you might even smash through one of those low roofs. Imagine all that happening to a baby mouse. There wouldn't be much left to tell the tale when he hit the ground."

John Churchmouse bit his lip until the blood trickled to his chin.

The Abbot disguised his true feelings and shrugged carelessly. "Then as far as I am concerned you have our surrender, but not completely. Unfortunately, I am only the voice of one, and this Abbey belongs to us all, not just me. We must have a little time to consider your offer, then a vote will have to be taken."

Ironbeak raked the path fiercely with his talons. "I will have your complete surrender. Now!"

The Abbot sat upon the path. Plucking a blade of grass, he sucked it, shaking his head.

"I am very sorry, but it is not my decision. Throw the

captives from the roof if you must. All our creatures are not present, and it is not possible to give you a firm decision right now. We need time to discuss this and take a ballot."

Ironbeak kicked gravel left and right, realizing that if the captives were slain his bargaining power was lost.

"You say you need time. How much time, earth-crawler?" he demanded.

"Oh, at least three sunsets."

"That is too long. How do I know you are not planning something?"

The Abbot looked old and frail, and he smiled dis-armingly. "General, you give us too much credit. What could we do against you in the space of three sunsets? We are not warriors, we cannot fly like you birds, we are only earthcrawlers. Besides, you hold the captives. What better insurance of our good behaviour?"

The raven signalled Mangiz to have the captives taken into the roofspaces.

"Two sunsets, not three." He clacked his beak decisively. 'Two sunsets and no longer!"

Mordalfus stood up and bowed gravely. "Thank you, Ironbeak. You shall have our answer two sunsets from now."

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The raft was proving successful. Though the water hammered it hard in midcurrent, it held together admirably. Log-a-Log was in his element, manoeuvring the tiller as he shouted out orders above the rush of the waters. The long poles they had used for punting were now useless as a means of propelling the craft, and they relied upon the steering skills of the shrew leader.

Matthias stood at the forward end scanning the other shore, Basil and Cheek hung on to each other for dear life, with Jess, Jabez and Orlando near to paw, surrounded by shrews who packed the floating deck to its edges. They were past the midriver point when Matthias made his way across to Log-a-Log.

"How is she handling?"

"Oh, fine, Matthias, fine," Log-a-Log said airily. "As you can see, we've sprung a small leak or two, but nothing to worry about. I'll make for that spot over there. If s a curving inlet and the water looks almost still, so it must be by-passed by the main center current. Are you all right, not worried about anything?"

"Not exactly worried, just keeping my eyes, ears and wits about me," Matthias admitted. "That shore looks a bit too peaceful for my liking."

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"Ha, anything that looks peaceful is exactly to my liking."

Stonefleck stood with his back to a rock on the open bank, completely disguised by his strange coat. In his paws he held a bow with an arrow notched on its string. Coolly he watched the raft looming larger, knowing that his formidable army was waiting, bows at the ready for its leader to fire the first arrow.

Basil relaxed his grip on Cheek. "Ha, we're not bad sailors after all, young Cheek. Can't you feel the water gettin' smoother, not so much of that infernal bobbin' up and down like a duck's bottom?"

"That's as may be Basil, but I won't feel easy until me young paws are on dry land again," the otter said nervously. "Lookit that Log-a-Log shrew, he's enjoyin' it all. I bet he'll be sorry to leave this raft."

"Stand ready with those poles," Log-a-Log called to the shrews seated at the outboard edges. "We'll be into still waters soon."

A hissing volley of arrows speeding like flighted death cut down the six shrews who stood grasping the poles. They toppled lifeless into the water.

Immediately, the shore was alive with innumerable rats unleashing arrows one after another into the unprotected creatures on the fiat raft deck.

Taken completely by surprise, there was only one course of action open to Matthias. Ducking and dodging flying shafts, he yelled, "Overboard! Everybeast overboard. Stay on the river side of the raft. Keep low!"

There was a mass scramble, making the raft tilt perilously. Matthias, Log-a-Log and Jess unfastened their slings. All around them the shrews leapt into the water, dinging to the side of the raft furthest from the shore. The three friends launched slingstones at the attackers, but they did little good. Arrows still poured back at them like spring rain.

"Log-a-Log, Jess, get off the raft, hurry!" Matthias shouted urgently.

The squirrel and the shrew did not stop to argue, they abandoned the heeling raft and took to the water. Matthias went last.

Stonefleck looked at the sky. Twilight was arriving. He signalled a cease-fire.

"Wait, they're in the water now. Lefs watch the sport before we open up again. But pick off any loose ones that you sight."

The rat army packed to the water's edge, gazing at the bobbing raft an arrow's-length away.

Basil spat out a mouthful of river water as he clung to the side of the raft.

"Ambushed!" he said disgustedly. "Where in the name of fur and claw did that mob spring from? They're no slouches with those bows, Orlando."

"If I could reach them with my battleaxe, I'd show them I'm no slouch, the filthy assassins. Ouch, what was that?"

There were shouts and screams from the shrews.

"Ow! I've been bitten!"

"Ouch, ow! Me too!"

"Owooh! I'm bleeding!"

Matthias gritted his teeth. "Silence. Be still. It's probably just a shoal of small fish."

Jess changed places until she was by Matthias. "Owen! It's like sitting on a beehive," she complained. "Cheek's got more sense. Look, he's still on the raft."

A shrew who had been bitten tried hauling himself out of the water; he took an arrow between the eyes. Another shrew tried swimming away from the raft; two arrows sank him. The rats were sniping from the bank at anything that popped up or moved.

Cheek lay sprawled flat in the center of the raft, ignoring Matthias.

"Come off that raft. Cheek, You'll be shot," Matthias said sharply.

"No fear. Lie low and ding tight, that's what I'm going to do. I'm not going into that river."

Basil sucked up water and spat it at the young otter.

"You tittle nuisance, come off that raft, sir. Off, I say!" he ordered.

Matthias felt tiny teeth bite his tail. He kicked out and was bitten again.

"Leave him, Basil. Lefs think of some way out of this. The raft is drifting towards those rats. Duck! They're firing again."

More volleys of arrows followed.

For the first time in a long while, Stonefleck allowed himself a tight smile of satisfaction. "We've got them. They're sailing towards us. Keep up the arrows! Those who aren't eaten will be shot. I want no captives. We're not slavers; leave that to Slagar."

Jabez Stump was being bitten on his unprotected paws.

"I can't stand much more of this," the hedgehog winced. "What's to be done?"

"Hold the raft tight," Log-a-Log called out. "Try backing water. We might just tow it off into the main current again and get washed away from this lot."

They tried as hard as they could, and the raft backed off slightly.

"If s heavy going. Cheek, will you get off that raft. We're towing your weight down here," Matthias said crossly.

Cheek lay flat, dinging tighter to the deck as arrows whizzed over him in flights.

"No! Go 'way, leave me alone."

Orlando lost his temper. He took the battleaxe by its head and made a mighty sweep at Cheek with the long handle.

Darkness had practically fallen, and the young otter

did not see the axe handle craning. It struck him a blow and pushed him off into the water with a loud splash. "Yah gerroff, you great stripedo"

Splash!

Cheek could not deny his birthright; he was an otter through and through. As skillfully as any fish, he cut through the water surrounding the rah, appearing alongside Basil.

The hare looked at him suspiciously. "You're chewing, young Master Cheek. Where are you hidin' the food?"

Cheek smacked his lips, 'little fishes. The river's swarmin' with 'em, mere must be millions. Taste lovely, though. I'd have got into the water sooner if I'd known 1 wasn't eoin' to be afraid and all mis food was here."

With mat, he disappeared beneath the surface and began filling his stomach with the finny delicacies. Cheek was biting back.

On shore Stonefleck rapped out orders to one of his Captains. "Light some flaming arrows. Shoot at the raft. Hurry, or they'll paddle it out of our reach. Tell the others to get the ferry going. See if we can get doser. The rest of you, keep firing."

The rat Captain looked quesnoningly at Stonefleck. "But surely they'll be eaten by the fishes?"

Stonefleck fired off an arrow before replying, "If s the otter. I forgot about that one. He'll eat those fish like a pig at acorns."

"But there's far too many fish for him to eat. Chief. The water's alive with 'em/' the Captain argued.

"Fool! Once those fish sense there's an otter in the water, they'll stay away from that area. Then those creatures will be able to paddle the raft out into the mainstream current. I want to finish it here tonight, not in the morning a night's march down the bank. Now get about your business."

Matthias heaved a sigh of relief. "Whew! At least those fish aren't biting so much."

Cheek popped up beside him. "Yum, yum. You've got me to thank for that!"

Orlando ducked him back under with a big blunt paw.

"Stop gabbing and keep scoffing. You to thank indeed! You mean you've got my axe handle to thank. And don't think you won't taste it if you don't keep those fishes away, young otter."

The night sky was cut by the light of a flaming arrow which shot through the dark to bury itself in the side of the raft.

Jess put it out by squirting a mouthful of water at it. "Fire arrows, Matthias/' she remarked. "Look, I can see by the light of their fire that they're launching a raft."

Matthias redoubled his efforts,

"Hurry, everybeast, kick out as hard as you can,"

Cheek gripped a trailing rope in his teeth and swam strongly with it. The raft doubled its speed. Arrows zinged all around them as the rats leant over the rails of their own ferry raft.

"Keep down, keep pulling, keep paddling," Orlando yelled. "They're coming after us."

As he shouted, a shrew next to him let go and floated away, transfixed by an arrow.

Stonefleck was on the ferry raft, firing arrow after arrow.

"Don't let them get away," he exhorted his army. "Get the poles. Come on, get pushing with those poles. Fire! Keep after them!"

With superior numbers and long poles, the rat ferry drew closer to the raft. Stonefleck waved to the shore.

"No more fire arrows," he ordered. "You might hit us. We've got them now!"

Log-a-Log spat into the water.

"Did you hear that, Guosim. Kick now. Kick for your lives!"

The woodlander's raft pulled away fractionally, but Stonefleck urged his rats to greater efforts with their long poles.

The two vessels were separated only by a thin margin of river. Stonefleck and a few chosen rats stood outside the rails of the ferry, preparing to jump from one craft to the other. The light of victory gleamed in Stonefleck's normally impassive eyes.

Matthias pulled himself up and saw what was happening.

"It looks as if they're going to board us/' he said gloomily.

Orlando heaved himself from the water and stood dripping on the deck of the raft, waving his battleaxe.

"Come on, rats, lefs see what you've got inside your heads!" he taunted.

An arrow from the rat ferry struck Orlando in his paw. He pulled it out contemptuously. Snapping it easily, he flung it at Stonefleck.

"You'll have to do better than that to stop me, ratface!" he called.

Suddenly the raft sped off downriver on the rushing current. The rat ferry stopped stock-still, throwing Stonefleck and several others into the water.

Hurriedly, the rats dragged their leader and the others back aboard.

Stonefleck twanged his wet bowstring and spat water. "Why didn't somebeast untie the ferry towropes? Pull us back to shore. We'll have to follow along the bank."

A ragged cheer arose from the shrews' raft as the friends disappeared into the night on die rushing water.

That evening, a group sat around the table in Cavern

Hole discussing General Ironbeak's ultimatum. The

reaction was angry and indignant. "Who does he think he is? Redwall isn't conquered

mat easy."

"We beat them once, we can do it again." "Aye, but this time Ironbeak has the hostages." "He'll kill them if we don't surrender." "Hurr, he'm a crafty owd burdbag, thafn."

The Abbot rapped the table. "Silence, please. We have no time to sit about arguing. What I need is some sensible suggestions. Let us review the position. The raven has the hostages, and no matter how we try to buy time or debate, he'll kill them eventually, make no mistake about that. I tried to bluff him today, possibly I succeeded, but it won't last. Listen, even if it meant the loss of just one life, I would have to surrender the Abbey, We cannot have three

deaths on our heads; it is against all our principles."

Winifred the Otter thumped the table with her tail. "Play the villain at his own game, then. Whaf s the name for it? Er, subterfuge, that*s it. We'll use subterfuge."

Every creature sat up bright and attentive. When there was no response to Winifred's suggestion, they slumped back.

"We'm gotter be a-thinken 'ard, rasslin' wi' uz brains," Foremole urged.

More silence followed.

"Surely somebody must have a glimmer of a plan?" Winifred said sadly.

"Here comes supper. Lefs think while we eat," the Abbot suggested.

"Good idea," Ambrose Spike agreed. "Sometimes I thinks the brainbox and the stomach bag is joined up some'ow. Hoho, I say, they done us proud, acorn salad and spiced apple'n'damson pie"

"Pie, that's it!"

They turned to stare at John Churchmouse.

"I was trying to remember the name of those black and white birds that are with Ironbeak. It's pie. Magpie!"

The Abbot put aside his platter. "Go on, John, think hard. Have you got an idea?"

John scratched his whiskers in frustration. "Oh, if only I could remember what it was. It's stuck right between the tips of my ears. Hmph! It's no good, I've forgotten now."

Ambrose supped October ale noisily from a beaker.

"Pity, I thought you was goin' to come up with a plan to get your missus an' Cornflower an' that baby down off the roof."

"The roof, the magpies, thafs it!" John Churcnmouse banged his paw down on the table, squelching a wedge of pie by mistake. "Of course, I saw those three magpies only this morning, robbing our orchard and flying up to the eaves. Those birds are Ironbeak's supply line. He needs them to bring in food!"

"And if we could capture 'em, we could do a swap," Winifred said through a mouthful of salad. "Three magpies for three hostages. Good idea, John."

"Burr aye, vittles be of more use to burdbags than 'ostages. Otherwise they'd be a-starved from 'unger," Foremole added.

Constance rapped the table. "Right, lef s get a proper plan organized. What we propose is to capture the three magpies and exchange them for the hostages. No army can survive without supplies, and Ironbeak knows this. He wouldn't be able to keep his followers here if they were starving. This way we can save Redwall and get the hostages back. But how do we capture the magpies?"

The Abbot held up a paw. "1 used to be the Abbey fishermouse before I was Abbot. Could we not snare them with fishing nets? We've got lots of big nets."

"Well said. Abbot, but magpies are not fishes. How would you snare them into nets?" Constance asked.

Ambrose Spike poked his snout out of the ale beaker. "Find out where they get their food

supplies and put down bait."

"I think they get their supplies from our orchard," John Churchmouse said, licking pie from his paw.

Little Sister May was highly indignant. "I'm certain they do. Father Abbot! Only today I saw them from the infirmary window, those three dreadful birds, stealing from our orchard. Anything that falls ripe from a bush or tree, they cany off. If s theft, that's what it is."

"Durty ol' burdbags, oi was a-wonderen whurr all they ripe strawb'rries was agoin'."

"Exactly, Mr. Foremole." Sister May wagged a reproving paw. "At one time it was only you and Mr. Stag Hare who used to steal them, but those three birds, gracious me! You'd think we were growing strawberries just for their benefit. I watched them guzzle down a great load before carrying off as much as they could with them. Disgraceful!"

Foremole covered his eyes with a huge digging paw. "Hurr hurr. Sister, Oi was only a-testin" they berries. It were mainly young Mattimeo an' that Tim'n'Tess wi' thurr squirrel pal as scoffed most o' them. Hurr hurr, young roguers!"

"You're right, Foremole," John Churchmouse sniffed. "I only wish they were still here to do it. I for one wouldn't grudge them the odd strawberry from the patch."

There were murmurs of agreement from all.

Little Sister May blew her nose loudly. "Well, talk like this isn't getting many dishes washed. I've got an idea. Suppose we gather the ripest strawberries and sprinkle mem with some sort of sleeping potion, then we could put them in one place in the orchard and lie in wait with the nets."

"Sister May, I'm shocked and surprised at you!" Abbot Mordalfus shook his head in amazement. "What a good idea. But I'm not sure we know enough about sleeping potions. Thafs the sort of thing the masked fox used on us. You can look to villains for that sort of thing, but we are only simple Abbey dwellers."

"Leave it to me. Father Abbot," little Sister May smiled sweetly. "I have enough herbs, berries and roots in my infirmary cupboard to lay a horse out flat. Oh, it will be exciting. I've always wanted to try my paw at sleeping potions."

Foremole tugged his snout in admiration. "You'm a proper liddle fiend an' no mistake, marm. Oi'll escort you up to 'firmary to pick up your potions an' suchloik."

Ambrose Spike crooked a paw at the Abbot. "Follow

me, I've got your big nets stowed away in my cellars." Mobilized by fresh hope, the Abbey dwellers went about their tasks.

Up in the roofepaces Cornflower rocked the sleeping baby Rollo upon her lap as she and Mrs. Churchmouse conversed in hushed tones.

"Look, bless him, he's snoring away like my Mattimeo used to when he was a baby," she said, becoming sad. "I don't think there's a moment of one day since Matti-meo's been gone when I haven't thought of him. First I worry, then I tell myself if 11 be all right because Matthias will have probably found him, then ! go back to worrying, men I tell myself he may have escaped. Oh, Mrs. Churchmouse, if only they were all babies again like Rollo."

"Aye, those were the best times. My 11m and Tess were a right pair of little scallywags, I can tell you. Mr. Churchmouse and I never got a wink's steep that first season they were bom. All they wanted to do was play the whole night long. D'you suppose that the raven will really have us thrown from the roof?" asked Mrs. Churchmouse apprehensively.

"Hell do what he has to, Mrs. Churchmouse. I'm afraid of him, but I don't care what happens as long as that horrible bird doesn't get Redwall. That would be the end."

The Churchmouse stroked baby Rollo; he had stopped snoring and started sucking his paw.

"What hope is there for this poor little mite, no mummy and a prisoner too?" she wondered.

Cornflower sighed. The roofspace was dark and chilly with night draughts sweeping in under the eaves. All around them the black birds perched in the rafters, and it was difficult to tell whether they were awake or sleeping. She wondered where Matthias was and what he would be doing at this moment. Thinking of her husband, the Redwall Warrior, gave her courage again.

"Don't you fret, Mrs. Churchmouse. Our friends in the

Abbey will have made plans to free us, you'll see. Lef s try and get a bit of sleep. Here, we'll share my old shawl."

Clouds scudded across the moon on their way across the night sky, while a million stars twinkled over the gently swaying forest.

33

Mattimeo was awakened by the sound of the night guards. Bageye and Skinpaw were on duty, and they walked past the sleeping captives conversing in low earnest tones. The young mouse could not hear what was said, though he strained his ears to catch any hint as to their eventual destination.

"Marti, are you awake?"

"Only just, Tess. Keep your voice down, the rest are still asleep."

"Is anything the matter?" the churchmouse asked.

"Yes and no," he replied. "I was trying to hear what tihe guards were talking about. They've seemed very edgy since we left the forest and hills where Stonefleck and his rats live."

"Thaf s strange, I noticed the same thing last night, before we camped down here. They're all so silent and uneasy, even Slagar."

Mattimeo raised his head, taking in the scene around him. The earth was flat, dry and dusty; no trees grew and there was little sign of any grass, shrubs or greenery. It was a dusty brown desolation stretching out before them.

"I tell you, Tess, I don't like it myself. This far south Mossflower country is very odd. Listen, you can't even

hear a single bird singing. What sort of land is it where even the birds cannot live?"

Young Jube the hedgehog stirred in his sleep, he whimpered and turned restlessly. Tess passed her paw gently over his headspikes, and he settled down into a quiet slumber.

"Poor little Jube," she said sympathetically. "He used to be so confident that his father would rescue him, and treated the whole thing as if he were only along with us for part of the journey. I'm worried about him, he's so thin and sad-looking these days."

Mattimeo smiled at the churchmouse. "You sounded just like your mum then, Tess, always fussing and worrying over some young one. You're right, though, Jube isn't his old self anymore. In fact, none of us are, we're much thinner and older. I'm not surprised, after all we've been through since that night of the feast at Redwall."

Tess looked at her habit. It was torn, dusty and stained.

"It all seems so long ago. I think we've grown up a lot since then. Ah, well, the main thing is that we're still together. We've made friends, too. Look at Auma; I couldn't imagine life without her and Jube anymore."

Slavers and captives alike began wakening. Mattimeo winked at Tess and smiled as cheerfully as he could.

"We'll come through it all, you wait and see," he said comfortingly. "Ho hum! Another nice sunny day for a walk, eh, Tess? I wonder where old Slagar is taking us today. Nut-gathering? Bcknkking? What do you think?"

Tess stood up, looking a bit more like her old self. "Oh, I think we'd better just stay with the rest and have a nice ramble," she chuckled. "What about you? Would you like to play follow my leader - or should I say, follow my Slagar? Come on, mouse, pick up your daisy chain and lef s go."

Bageye checked their manacles, muttering in a sullen voice, "Huh, don't know what you two have got to laugh about."

259

Orlando waded ashore towing the raft behind him. It had been a hard and dangerous night, fighting their way out of the main current back into the shallows. The crew had poled the raft into a small bay. Wet and weary, they stumbled onto dry land in the pale dawn light shivering after their nightlong ordeal on the swift choppy river. v

Basil slicked water from his long drooping ears. "Whaaw! Here's one old soldier who won't complain when the sun starts getting hot. No chance of a bite o' breakfast, I suppose?"

Matthias dried his sword carefully on a tussock of grass. "No chance at all, old soldier. Those rats will be dashing along the banks right now, hoping they'll catch up with us. We'd better move fast if we want to stay alive. Log-a-Log, you and Cheek tow the raft out a bit. The current will carry it away; no sense leaving it here as a marker where we came ashore. Jess/ Jabez, would you take the rear and try to cover our tracks from the bank? Leave them as few clues as possible; it may buy us a bit of time."

Jess Squirrel bounded up a nearby tree, took a quick look around and descended speedily.

"Matthias, we'd better hurry," she urged. "I could see movement in the bushes further up the bank. If we stay here much longer we're going to have company."

"Right, Jess. Come on, everybody. Keep me in sight. I'm going to take a curving sweep into these trees, then with a bit of luck we'll circle south and miss the rats. Hurry now, let's get out of he"

An arrow bedded in the ground. It stood quivering a fraction from Orlando, who kicked it into the river.

"Thaf s the trouble with being my size, you make a good target. Lef s run for it!"

The rat advance scout fired a whistling arrow upwards to alert the main body. Stonetleck turned in its direction.

"They're trying to head south through the trees. Follow me, we'll cut them off."

He set off at a tangent, cutting into the woodland to outflank Matthias.

Morning sunlight slanted into the trees as swarms of rats ran silently, keeping abreast of their leader. Stone-fleck halted on a sloping hillside and listened carefully: they were coming. Nodding to his followers, he dropped down behind an oak. The rats spread themselves among the other trees, notching arrows onto bowstrings. He could not have timed it better. The woodlanders came hurrying through the forest below, looking back over their shoulders to see if they were being pursued.

Stonefleck let fly a shaft at the mouse in the lead, hoping to catch him in the side of his neck. The mottled rat gave a grunt of disappointment as the arrow pinged harmlessly oft the hilt of a big sword the mouse was carrying slung across his back and shoulders. A hail of arrows hit the main party below, shrews fell slain and wounded as the mouse in the lead shouted:

"Ambush! They're on our right flank. Follow me!"

They rushed for cover in the protection of the forest to their left, Stonefleck dashed down the hill after them.

"Charge!"

It was a lucky accident that Stonefleck tripped over a protruding tree root. The rats swarmed past him in a headlong attack, only to be met by Matthias and Orlando.

The two warriors had taken a temporary stand, allowing the rest of their party to get away. Armed only with bows and arrows, the rats could not fire in dose combat. Orlando took the first two with a cleaving sideways chop of the huge war axe, while Matthias stepped swiftly from behind a tree and slew a rat who was dashing past. Turning quickly, he took another on the point of his sword. Orlando thundered into a group of the front runners. Wielding his axe, he scattered them like chaff, roaring aloud his battlecry:

"Eulaliaaaaa!"

"Redwalffll!"

Matthias was at his side, the scything, whirling blade cutting a deadly pattern of cold steel amid the rats.

Stunned by the shock of the wild attack, the rat horde fell back. Stonefleck ran up, urging them forward.

"Rush them, there's only two. Come on!"

They regrouped and dashed in, yelling wildly, but the two warriors were gone!

Matthias and Orlando ran panting into the main party a short distance ahead. The warrior mouse was angry.

"Why didn't you keep running? We would have caught up with you."

Basil shook his head. "We couldn't, not after we heard all the screams and shouts from back there. We were about to go back and help you."

"You should have kept going," Matthias repeated. "No time to argue now, here they come again."

Log-a-Log broke into a run, pointing ahead. "Look, there's a clearing over that way. Lef s get to the other side of it and hold them off with our slings."

Stonefleck and his horde were hot on the trail. They had covered half the clearing when a deep shrew voice called out:

"Sling!"

A rain of hard river pebbles struck the rats, felling several and driving the rest back. Stonefleck grouped his force at the other side of the clearing. They stood among the trees and returned fire with arrows. Screams and cries rang out as the battle raged back and forth, shafts going one way, stones flying the other. Basil took charge of the slingers, forming them into three ranks.

"First rank, sling and reload! Second rank, sling and reload! Third rank, sling and reload!" he ordered.

Matthias and his friends did as best as they could, dodging from tree to tree, picking off the odd rat with their slings.

Jess took a brief respite and dropped down by Matthias.

"I'm out of stones. Have you got many left?" she asked the warrior mouse.

"Hardly any. They're no match for arrows, Jess. Look, there's more rats arriving by the moment; we're outnumbered by at least ten to one."

"At least. They only have to follow us and pick us off one by one, and we can't make a run for it now, their firepower is too heavy. I'd hate to die this far from Redwall, Matthias."

"Me too, Jess, but they've got us pinned down now. It was a mistake to try and make a stand, but they'd have caught us if we'd kept running. I'll have to rack my brains and see if I can't come up with Whafs that?"

"Sparra kill! Kill! Kill! Eccecccceoc!"

Queen Warbeak and her Sparra fighters hurtled into the rats like a winged shower of small beaks and talons.

Jess leapt forward. "Matthias, if s Warbeak and her Sparra folk. What are they doing here?"

"I don't know, but they'll be massacred if we don't help them. Basil, Log-a-Log! Come on. Chaaaaarge!"

Quickbill and his two brothers Brightback and Diptail had found an easy source of supply for Ironbeak's fighters. Why forage in the woods when mere was a beautiful orchard right in the grounds of the big redstone house?

With the Redwall inhabitants forced to stay indoors, the three magpies had grown bold. Now

they did not even bother foraging by night. Each day they would fly down to the orchard and eat their fill before loading up with supplies to take to the roofspace. Quickbill was amazed at so much different fruit growing in one place; he had never encountered an orchard before.

"Hakka! The northlands were never like this, brothers; apples, pears, plums and look, look at those juicy red berries!"

The trio stood around the strawberries on the ground, unhurried, each seeking out a bigger strawberry than the one his brother was eating. They were behaving like naughty young ones raiding the orchard.

"Chakka! Look at this one, it is like two stuck together."

"Yaah, but this berry is more red and shiny, see."

"Kacha! I will eat them all as long as they are fat and juicy."

The magpies' long tails dipped and jerked as they gobbled the strawberries with swift bobbing head movements. They carried on, comparing berries as they greedily ravaged the well-tended strawberry patch. Suddenly Brightback belched, then he staggered and fell awkwardly.

His two brothers cackled aloud at the sight.

"Chahaha! The red berries are making you too fat to stand, brother. We will load our bags and fly back up."

Diptail pecked at a berry and missed. His beak struck the soil. Smiling foolishly, he flapped his wings and fell flat.

"Yakko! The red berries are magic. I cannot fly," he giggled.

Quickbill yawned. He lay in the soil, flapping his wings against it with a silly grin on his face.

"Coohoo! Look at me, I'm flying."

Led by Constance, a group of Redwallers crept out from behind a buttress at the east corner of the Abbey. They were carrying nets.

"Easy now, lef s bag all three at once."

Quickbill was the strongest of the three. He saw the shadow of the net spreading over him, but he felt unable to do anything about it. Diptail was in a deep drugged sleep. Brightback tried to keep his eyes open, but they snapped shut. The net fell on them, trapping the three birds squarely at its center. They lay stunned amid the remains of the knockout strawberries.

Little Sister May came out from behind the raspberry canes, wagging a paw at the sleeping thieves. "It serves you right. I hope you wake with dreadful headaches!"

Constance and Winifred rolled the magpies tightly in the nets. "They can't hear you, Sister," Constance told her. "Let's get them inside before we're spotted."

Pushing and tugging, they lugged their feathered hostages inside.

The Abbot dusted off his paws. "Well done, my friends. What do we do now, wait until the appointed time or open negotiations right away?"

Constance gave a huge grin. She was beginning to enjoy herself.

"Allow me. Father Abbot. Leave it to Ambrose and me. We'll go and inform Ironbeak that we have three chickens in the bag. The rest of you, take up your posts at the windows, and make sure there are plenty of arrows and spears showing."

Constance and Ambrose strolled out in leisurely fashion. The badger threw her head back and called up to the roof, "Hey, you up there! Irontrousers, or whatever you call yourself. Get down here, I want a word with you."

Ambrose sniggered into his paws. "I wish Basil Stag Hare was here, he'd think of some good names to caU that bird."

There was a short silence, then Mangiz appeared at the eaves. The crow flapped down to a lower roof level.

"Are you ready to surrender so early, stripedog?" he asked.

"Go and boil your beak, featherbag!"

"Silence, earthcrawler. My General sent me to speak with you."

Ambrose wrinkled his snout at Mangiz. "Listen, maggorbrain, you just flap back to your Chief and tell him that we want to speak to the big fish and not the little worm. Hurry up now, don't stand there gawpin'!"

The seer crow was outraged. "Mangiz does not forget an insult, hedgepig."

Ambrose smiled cheekily. "Good, then here's a few more for you to remember, you pot-bellied, cross-eyed, feather-bottomed excuse for a duck. Now be off with you before I really get goin'!"

When the crow had gone, Ambrose turned to Con-

stance. "What d'you think, stripedog, was I a bit too hard on him?"

Constance thought for a moment. "No, no, on the whole I thought you did quite well, hedgepig."

Ironbeak flew out with Mangiz and several of the rooks. They came down to the lowest roof. Constance did not mince her words.

"Hello there, Ironbum, or is it Tinbeak? I can never remember. Anyhow, about the three hostages you're holding, don't you think if s high time you let them go?"

Ironbeak suspected by the badger's tone that something was amiss, but he kept up a bold imperious front.

"If you have not come to surrender, they will die, earthcrawler."

Ambrose wriggled his spikes. "I knew you'd do no good talking politely to that bird."

Constance stopped her teasing. Now that she had drawn the raven out, her tone became harsh and serious.

"Listen to me, Ironbeak. We are holding your three magpies prisoner. If you harm a single hair of those hostages, I will personally drown those birds in our Abbey pond. Is that clear?"

The birds on the roof cawed and cackled in consternation. Ironbeak silenced them with a wave of his wing.

"You have captured Quickbill and his brothers? I do not believe it."

Constance moved to the Abbey door. "Then I will show you the proof. We have cut your supply line; you will starve without the magpies."

Constance went indoors. A moment later, she was dragging out the net with the three magpies inside.

"They say that seeing is believing, what do you say to that?" she called.

Ironbeak peered over the guttering. "I say that it was very clever of you, stripedog. But it wUl do you no good, I will send others out to forage."

"Oh, as I understand it, warriors are warriors, not

scavengers. Your fighters could not do the job, that's why you had magpies."

"Kaahl Then we will become scavengers, we will take the food from that place you call orchard."

Ambrose pointed to the windows. "No you won't, we've got archers, sling-throwers and javelins stationed at the windows facing the orchard. It is not as far to shoot from there as it is from the ground to the rooftop. Send a few of those birds into the orchard now and you'll see what we mean."

Whilst Ironbeak stood on the roof digesting this information, Ambrose pointed at the remains of the strawberries lying in the patch.

"Shoot!"

There was a twang and hiss from the windows. Four arrows and two javelins stood quivering among the strawberries.

Ironbeak swallowed hard. "What do you want?"

Constance kept a heavy paw upon the net. "You know what we want, an exchange of hostages."

"What you ask is not possible."

"Then your army will starve in the roofspaces," she warned.

"We will kill your mice if you do not surrender," Ironbeak countered.

"And we will kill your magpies. This net is weighted with stones. They will drown in the pond."

"You are peaceful creatures. I know your ways, you could not do such a thing."

Constance seized the net in her paws and then began dragging it to the Abbey pond.

"Your mistake," she snarled savagely. "They may be peaceable creatures; badgers are not. It will be a pleasure to rid Mossflower of this scum. I am done with talking!"

The big badger tumbled the net into the shallows.

Revived by the water, the three magpie brothers awoke, spluttering.

"Yflggfl.' Save us, Ironbeak, save us. Help, we will drown trapped in this net, Ironbeak, General, save us!"

The birds on the roof danced anxiously around their leader, cawing and flapping. Mangiz whispered something to him. The raven General cocked his head towards the crow, his bright eye roving across the scene at the pond.

When Mangiz had finished, Ironbeak spoke in a level voice:

"Stop! Do not drown my magpie brethren. They have served me well. I will talk terms with you."

A great cheer arose from the defenders at the window slits.

Constance gave a silent sigh of relief. "Then you agree to our request, three in exchange for three?"

Ironbeak spread his wings. "So be it! The exchange will take place here, in front of this redstone house when the evening bells toll at sunset."

Ambrose exchanged glances with Constance.

"Let the hostages be freed here and now!" she proposed.

Ironbeak folded his wings and closed his eyes with finality. "Do not stretch your luck, earthcrawlers. You have gained a victory. The exchange will take place as I say. Agreed?"

Constance hauled the net from the shallows. "Agreed!"

When the birds had flown, Ambrose shook his head at Constance. "If s some sort of trap, I can feel it in me spikes. That bird has somethin' in mind for us. Didn't you see him whispering with the crow? They were hatching a plan."

The Abbot came out to greet them.

"I agree with Ambrose," he said. "They are obviously working out a trap. You did well. It was a good bluff, Constance."

The big badger looked grim. "It was no bluff. Father Abbot. I would drown a dozen like these in the net if our Abbey or our creatures were threatened. We will wait and see what they have planned for sunset."

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Queen Warbeak and her sparrows stood little chance against the rats. Many of them were shot in the air. But the Queen and her Sparra warriors were brave and reckless fighters, and they plunged in regardless of danger. Matthias and Orlando headed the charge across the clearings; the shrews drew their short swords and followed. Cheek, Jess and Jabez whirled slings loaded with stones as clubs, and Basil hurtled in with both long back legs kicking dangerously. "Redwaaaall! Mossfloweeeer! Guosim! Logalogalog!" The speed of the attack, combined with the sparrow assault, took the rats off guard. They fought tooth and claw, using arrows to stab with, but they were no match for the force that came at them, despite their superior numbers.

The shrews were fearsome warriors at close quarters, with their short swords. They fought in groups facing outwards. Circling and milling, they created a carousel of slaughter. Rats fell screaming and kicking everywhere. Cheek and Jabez stood back to back, thwacking away with their loaded slings. Sparra warriors fastened their claws into rats' heads and pecked madly at their faces. The rats were unused to being attacked in their own territory and they fought mainly a defensive action.

Many brought down shrews and sparrows. However, they were no match for Matthias and Orlando; the axe and the sword swathed into them at every turn. And rats flew high in the air from Basil's awesome kicks.

The battle raged back and forth. The woodlanders were still greatly outnumbered, though their weapons and fighting skills were superior. It might have gone one way or the other, when Log-a-Log turned the tide. He spied Stonefleck slinking away into the trees, and using his sword as a spear, he launched it at the rat Chieftain. His aim was true. Stonefleck fell, slain by the sword Log-a-Log had thrown.

When the rats saw their leader fall, the fight went out of them. Screaming and wailing, they scurried off into the trees.

Matthias stood leaning on his sword, breathing heavily. Ignoring the cuts and bites he had taken, the warrior mouse extended his paw to the shrew leader.

"Well thrown, Log-a-Log!"

The shrews gave a loud cheer for their leader.

Matthias looked around. The slain littered the edge of the clearing like leaves in autumn.

"Where is my friend Queen Warbeak?" he asked.

His heart sank within him. A small group of Sparra warriors who had survived the battle were grouped about their fallen Queen. Matthias, jess and Basil knelt by her side, tears streaming openly down their faces for the Sparra Queen lying there. Warbeak's eyes were dimmed in death, the breeze moved her feathers gently.

A sparrow passed Matthias a small scroll. "We come alia way from Redwall," he told the warrior mouse. "Abbot say give you this. Queen see you in trouble with ratworms. She say help um friend Matthias."

Jess lifted Warbeak lightly, and carried her up into a sycamore tree. Laying her on a broad bough, she covered the Sparra Queen with leaves in the time-honored Sparra fashion.

Matthias sat at the foot of the sycamore, his head in both paws, grieving for Warbeak.

Basil came over and patted Matthias. "There, there, old lad. I know if s a pity she had to die so far from Redwall, but she saved us by her courage."

Matthias plucked at a blade of grass. "Yes, the Queen loved Redwall. That was the bravest thing I've ever seen any creature do, Basil. She threw herself and her warriors at those rats, knowing she and her sparras stood no chance. They flew in against arrows and attacked with only beak and claw."

Orlando wiped his axe blade on the grass. "I never knew your sparrow friend, Matthias, but she saved all our lives by her brave action. I've seen creatures ten times her size without a quarter of her boldness. What a warrior!"

jess Squirrel looked up to the leafy shroud on the tree bough. "Good old Warbeak, eh? Totally mad, of course. She'd rather die than miss a good fight. I'll bet wherever she is now that she's chuckling at us standing round blubbering like a load of Abbey babes who have to go to bed early, instead of getting on with our search for the fox,"

Matthias rose dry-eyed. He stuck his swordpoint into the ground.

"Aye, Jess, you're right. We've got some burying to do here, then we will leave this place. I never want to set eyes on it again. We must carry on south."

Later that day they halted in a quiet place, an ash grove, far from the clearing where the battle had taken place. Matthias took stock of the situation. The surviving sparrows would fly back to Redwall, taking with them the news that the warrior mouse and his friends were alive and well, still on the trail of the young captives. Log-a-Log and the remainder of the now depleted Guostm voted firmly to stay with the friends and see the mission through. They

settled down to study the map and writings that had been sent from RedwaU.

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Matthias scanned the parchments carefully. "By the fur, I wish we had met up with Warbeak before we did. Listen to this:

Those who wish to challenge fate, To a jumbled shout walk straight. Sunset fires in dexteree, Find where Loamhedge used to be. At the high place near the skies, Look for other watchful eyes. Sleep not 'neath the darkpine trees, ' Be on guard, take not your ease, Voyage when the daylight dims. Danger in the water swims. Make no noise with spear or sword, Lest you wake the longtail horde. Shades of creatures who have died, Bones of warriors who once tried. Shrink not from the barren land, Look below from where you stand, This is where a stone may fall and make no sound at all. Those who cross and live to tell, See the badger and the bell, Face the lord who points the way After noon on summer's day. Death will open up its grave. Who goes there . . . ? None but the brave/

"Look at this map, we've come through all these places. There are the cliffs, here is the pine forest, here the water with the bows of the rats on the far shore. This place here, hummocks and trees, this is where we are now. What do you think, Basil?"

"You're right, of course, old warrior. Hmm, sound advice too. It warns of the dangers in the woods, even gives the little fishes a mention. Ha, 'voyage when the daylight dints'; maybe we would have stood a chance of giving those rats the slip if we'd crossed by night. Well,

well, a jolly old bit of prophecy here. Creatures certainly did die, and we've left the bones of warriors back there. But whaf s all this about shrinking from barren lands, eh? The only thing I ever shrunk from was lack of food, wot?"

Orlando checked the map. "Jess, do you think you could climb a high tree and look over to the south?"

To an expert climber like Jess this was but the work of a moment. She was up a hornbeam in the twinkling of an eye.

"We're nearly out of the woodlands," she called down from the topmost branches. "I can see

some sort of plain beyond. It looks very bare and dusty."

Matthias nodded approval. "Well, at least we're on the right track, but we've no way of telling how far south we've travelled. I suppose we'll have to try and cross the barren land and look for some place where we can look below to where a stone may fall and make no sound at all. Does that make any sense to you, Orlando?"

The badger shook his head. "If s all a mystery to me, but if it will help us to get our young ones back, I'm game to try. I know nothing of badgers' heads and bells and lords who point the way and death and graves, though."

Matthias stood. "Nor do I, friend, but I intend to find out. Log-a-Log, will your Guosim be ready to inarch at daybreak?"

"Ready as ever. Warrior. We'll soon see what other little surprises this strange southland has in store for us."

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The Abbey bells tolled their eventide watch over Redwall as the sun sank below the western plain.

Constance had taken no chances with the three magpies. They huddled miserably in a corner of Cavern Hole, each with its pinion feathers bound, legs hobbled and beak shut tightly with twine. Constance and the Abbot sat together in the opposite corner, listening earnestly to Ambrose Spike's report.

"There ain't been a move out of anybird, we watched the eaves all afternoon/ Brother Trugg, Foremole and meself. Not a feather or a beak stirred."

The Abbot scratched his chin. "Strange, I was sure that Ironbeak would try to lay some sort of trap, either him or that sly crow. Odd, very odd."

"Odd or not," Constance shrugged, "the sun's going down. We'd best get these three outside

and exchange them for three decent creatures. Winifred, will you and Foremole see that archers and javelins 611 the main doorways behind us? Keep them facing Ironbeak and his company in case of trouble."

Foremole saluted dutifully. "Doant ee wurry, marm, us'Il give'm billyo if n they moves a claw."

General Ironbeak's hostages had been carefully flown

down a short time after sunset. The two mousemothers kept their eyes shut tight as they were borne through the air by six rooks. Baby Rollo, however, enjoyed the flight immensely, whooping and giggling as he tugged at the three birds that were carrying him. They landed safely in front of the Abbey pond, then surprisingly the carrier birds flew off, leaving the hostages guarded only by Ironbeak and Mangiz. To forestall any thoughts of escape, the two birds kept their fearsome beaks dose to Rollo's head, knowing that neither Cornflower nor Mrs. Churchmouse would attempt anything whilst the infant was threatened. Slowly they walked across to the main Abbey door.

Constance and Ambrose awaited them, standing to one side of the three magpies. The open Abbey doors were crowded with determined Redwallers armed to the teeth.

Ironbeak halted short of the door.

"Why are all your creatures armed and menacing us like this. I understood this was to be a friendly exchange?" His voice was harsh and commanding.

Foremole waved a large spear at the raven. "Harr, doant make oi larff, you'm the vurmints wot been a-doin' all the tricksterin' an' attacken. Thus yurr's wot us calls porteckshun 'gainst crafty ol' burdbags."

Mangiz pointed with his wing. "Why are these birds bound like this? We have not tethered your creatures."

Ambrose winked at the crow. "Prob'ly 'cos mice don't have beaks and wings, puddenhead."

"I will not stand here to be insulted by you, hedgepig," Mangiz fumed.

"Then stand somewhere else and I'll insult you there, featherbag!!"

"Ambrose, do not provoke them," Constance interrupted. "We are here to make a peaceful exchange of hostages, one for one. Cornflower, are you all right?"

"Yes, thank you, Constance. As well as can be expected under the circumstances."

Constance bowed stiffly to Ironbeak. "Thank you, raven. As you can see, the magpies are unharmed, apart from being restrained, otherwise they have been well treated."

Ironbeak cast his bright eyes on the doorway. "You must think me a fool! I make no exchanges while we are faced with weapons. Tell your creatures to put down their arms."

"Aha! I thought so," Ambrose whispered to Constance. "This is where the raven shows 'is feathers. The moment we drop our weapons, 'e'll spring 'is trap, whatever it is."

Constance watched Ironbeak as she murmured back, "I know what you mean, Ambrose, but what can we do? He has kept his word, even coming unarmed to meet us. We cannot face him with an army geared up to the teeth."

"Hmm, I suppose you're right. Leave it to me."

He turned to the Redwall contingent. "Lay those weapons down and listen to me. If the raven or his pal try one false move, then grab the armoury up fast and make the pair of 'em into pincushions."

Ironbeak had heard what went on and nodded. "Do as you will. We have come here only to trade hostages, no tricks."

Constance banged her paw down upon the path. "Then lef s get to it and stop fussing about or we'll be here to see dawn break."

Ironbeak nodded to Mangiz, and the crow started the exchange.

"We release them at the same time, one for one. First the infant for Quickbill. Agreed?"

Constance untied the first magpie.

"Agreed!"

Rollo was aware of the gravity of the situation. He strode slowly across to Constance, crossing paths with Quickbill. On reaching his friends the little bankvole began singing:

"Kick a magpie in the eye.

Shoot a crow wiv a great big bow. . . ."

Winifred swept him up and hurried indoors.

"Now the one called Cornflower for Brightback."

"Agreed!"

The mouse and the magpie passed each other in silence. Tension mounted in the air now that there were only two left. As Cornflower embraced Constance, the harsh voice of Mangiz sounded:

"Last, the churchmouse for Diptail."

"Agreed!"

The exchange took place without a hitch.

Both sides stood watching each other.

At a wave from Ironbeak, the magpie brothers and Mangiz flew off, then the raven General fixed his eyes on Constance.

"I will continue to attack you. It is my destiny that I should rule in the great redstone house."

The badger gave him back stare for stare.

"Others have tried to conquer Redwall, warriors greater than you. We are still here. Right is on our side, Justice too. One day our warriors will return home, then you will be driven off or slain."

Ironbeak was unmoved. "HaJtJta/ We shall see. You are not as clever as you imagine, none of you. Did it not occur to you that my fighters were not with me to see the exchange take place?"

"Oh nuts'n'acorns," Ambrose groaned. "I knew the villain had somethin' hidden up 'is feathery sleeve."

"While I was drawing out this business for as long as possible," Ironbeak continued, "my birds were in your orchards loading up many supplies. I kept you talking long enough for them to make several trips. Your sentries who should have been guarding the windows feeing the orchard were watching me and Mangiz in case we tried something. Anyway, black birds cannot be seen flying by night. Also, I must tell you that we have moved down to your infirmary and dormitories. I am conquering this place from the top downwards. Now you are left only with the place called Cavern Hole. If you try

to cross the floor of Great Hall after dawn tomorrow, we will be watching from the galleries, ready to attack you. We have all the supplies needed, and you will be held to a state of siege below the floor of this place. You and your friends might think yourselves clever, but you are not wise enough to outsmart General Ironbeak." The raven shot off into the night sky like a dark arrow.

Constance shook her head wearily. "He wouldn't have outsmarted Matthias."

Cornflower patted Constance. "You were wonderfully brave to get us free. We're not beaten yet, as long as we're alive and Redwall stands, there is hope," she said reassuringly. "We must defend the Abbey and keep it safe, especially for the day when Matthias returns with Mattimeo. Strange, isn't it, I keep thinking of my little Matti, even at the oddest times."

Constance smiled fondly. "Thaf s because he's your son and you're his mother. Whenever I look at you, I can tell you are thinking of him. Any creature would be glad of a mum Hke you, Cornflower. Here, whaf s this, tears?"

Cornflower sniffed and wiped her eyes. "No. I'm just a little tired, I suppose. I hope Mattimeo is getting his proper sleep, wherever he is."

The trek across the great barren country started at daybreak. Canteens had been filled at the last woodland pool. Supplies were very low but the shrew cooks had done them proud. Log-a-Log and his scouts had foraged the woodland fringe, and fennel, cloudberry and dandelion, together with some hall-ripened hazelnuts, had been thrown into a large communal salad, with the addition of some dried fruit and the last of the cheese. Then a good meal had been eaten facing the flat expanse of sun-scorched earth.

Basil sniffed the dry air.

"Useless trying to scent anything around here. Still, die tracks are clear enough. I can see them from here.

runnin' off in a straight line. They're a day and a night ahead of us, I reckon."

' He stood, stretching his long limbs, gazing out at the already shimmering horizon as it wavered and rippled with the fierce heat.

"Right, lads, quick's the word an' sharp's the action, eh? Form up here and follow me. No lagging and sitting down on the bally old job. By the left... wait for it, Cheek . . . quick march!!"

The little column trekked off into the unknown expanses of the desert ahead of them, leaving behind the final fringes of Mossflower.

Slagar had driven both captives and slavers hard. Marching by night and resting by day, they had crossed the wasteland. Footsore and weary, Mattimeo and his companions helped each other along. Their mouths were dry and parched from lack of water, the manacles rubbed and chafed. Tess caught Cynthia Bankvole as she stumbled for the umpteenth time.

"Up now. Stay on your paws, Cynthia. If s daylight, so they'll let us rest soon."

The volemaid licked dusty lips with a dry tongue. "I hope so, Tess. I can't stand much more of it, though I don't know which I'd prefer right now, a drink or a sleep."

Auma lent her size and strength, supporting them both with a paw at their backs. "Keep going. I can see something ahead, though I don't exactly know what it is. Can you see it, Sam?" (

The young squirrel strained his eyes, "Looks like some sort of a black shadow with bushes and trees on the other side of it. Whatever it is, it has to be better than this wasteland. I think they're planning to let us rest when we reach there. Keep going, it shouldn't be too long now."

Distances in the drylands were deceptive. It was gone

midmorning when the slave line halted at the place which Auma and Sam had sighted. Cynthia Bank vole drew in a sharp breath and clapped a paw over her eyes, then sat down, dizzy with fright.

They had arrived at the brink of an abyss!

A huge rift in the earth opened before them. It was as if the world were splitting through its middle. Impenetrably black and endlessly deep, it stretched away in either direction as far as the eye could see. Though they were standing at its narrowest point, the distance across yawned many times the length of a tall beech tree. The captives stood wide-eyed in astonished silence at the awesome sight.

Across the gorge a swaying construction of rope and wood stretched. It was secured at either side by thick stakes driven deep into the earth, but the center of the rough bridge dipped perilously into the chasm.

Jube buried his face against the dusty ground. "Ooooh! I'd as soon die as try to cross that!"

A moan arose from the slave lines. Others felt the same as Jube, and even the stoats, weasels and ferrets who had come this far with Slagar began muttering among themselves.

The masked fox stood leaning against the stakes, watching them. He had come across this problem before and was ready for it.

"Frightened, eh? Legs turned to jelly, have they?" he taunted them.

"We never bargained for anything like this, Chief!" Threedaws gulped.

Slagar strolled to where two weasels, Drynose and Damper, stood guard over the expedition's food and water. Pushing them to one side, he took the three large water canteens and carried them to the head of the bridge.

"What d'you mean 'bargained'? You're not here to bargain, you are here to obey orders. You, Skinpaw, show them how if s done. A weasel like you isn't afraid of crossing a bridge."

Skinpaw shook his head vigorously. "Ask me to do anything, Slagar, anything. March, fight, climb mountains, cross rivers . . . but not that!"

The silken masked fluttered. The Cruel One seemed to be smiling beneath it. He turned to his slavers one by one.

"You, Halftail, or you, Viteh? How about you. Scringe? Or Bageye there? No?"

They remained silent, while Slagar spoke as if he were cajoling nervous young ones.

"Oh, come on now, it's only a little bridge across a gorge. Besides, do you see the bushes and trees on the other side? There's a lovely little pool there, full of nice cold water. Just think, you can drink all you like."

Skinpaw eyed the canteens that Slagar held.

"We've got water, Chief," he pointed out.

The fox swung the canteens out wide, letting go of them. He leaned over, watching them disappear into the abyss.

"Where? I don't see any water. Now, you spineless toads, listen to me. You have a choice: either you cross this bridge and drink water, or you stay on this side and die of thirst!"

Threeclaws was the first to go. He stepped gingerly out onto the swaying bridge, gripping the rope sides tightly. Carefully he tested each wooden slat before putting his weight on it.

When he was a short way out Slagar called, "Fleaback, Scringe, pick that line up and start the prisoners going. Halftail, you go with them. The rest of you follow after they've crossed."

Encouraged by Threeclaws' slow but sure passage, Fleaback and Scringe stepped onto the bridge, tugging the leadrope.

"Come on, you lot. Step lively, and no hanging back or stumbling," Scringe chivvied them.

Mattimeo could not shut his ears to the sobbing of

Cynthia and Jube, who were in a state of frozen shock. He tore a strip from the hem of his habit and bit it into two pieces.

"Here, Tess, put these around their eyes. Cynthia, Jube, listen. Hold on to Tess and Auma, and keep going. You'll be all right."

The trick worked. Groping awkwardly, the blindfolded creatures held tight to Tess and Auma, who, though they were both frightened of the swaying, sagging bridge, found that a lot of the fear was taken out of the crossing by attending to Cynthia and Jube.

Only Sam Squirrel was totally fearless about the bridge. At one point Tim had to remonstrate him for making the structure wobble with his jaunty walk.

"Hey, go easy, Sam," he called nervously. "There's others on this bridge not as clever as you at crossing gorges."

"Oops! Sorry, Tim. Never mind, we're nearly over now."

Ma ttimeo tried not to glance down into the bottomless depths. He dearly wished he had his paws on firm ground again.

The crossing was made without incident. Safely on the other side, everybeast breathed a huge sigh of relief. Slagar led them a short way into the bushes.

"There's the pool. Drink as much as you like. Three-claws, see they're fed and watered, then secure the line. HalftaU, come with me."

Slagar walked back to the edge of the gorge. While HalftaU watched, he crossed back over the bridge. Then the masked fox got out flint and steel. It did not take long to get the dust-dry ropes burning. As soon as they were alight he bounded onto the bridge and crossed back with surprising speed and agility. Chuckling to himself, he watched the ropes burn through. The bridge swayed and collapsed with a clatter of wooden slats as it struck the wall of the chasm beneath them. Slagar took Halftail's

dagger and sawed through the taut ropes which held the weight of the bridge. He leapt back as the whole structure slipped away with a creaking, groaning snap. They waited awhile, but there was complete silence from the depths of the abyss.

Slagar smiled. "See, completely bottomless. Nobeast can follow us now!"

A full-scale council was in progress at Cavern Hole. Winifred the Otter winced as Sister May applied poultices and herbs to her deeply scratched back.

"Aaahh! Go easy. Sister, that's the only back I've got. Ouch!"

Sister May went about her task, ignoring the protests. "Hold still, you silly otter! You were told not to cross Great Hall, but you would not listen. Stop wriggling while I attend to this scratch on your ear."

"Ow! What are you trying to do, pull me lug off? That ear's got to last me the rest of my life, you know!"

Constance pointed to Winifred. "As you can all see, she was injured merely trying to cross Great Hall. You must stay down here. Ironbeak and his birds are waiting in the galleries, and if one of us so much as shows a whisker outside Cavern Hole he or she will be slain. Winifred was lucky, she was swift enough to get away. Under no circumstances must you try to leave here. Besides, where would you go?"

"Well, I for one would go to my little gatehouse cottage," Cornflower answered. "Or I might gather fresh fruit and vegetables and water. It seems to me we're letting this Ironbeak have it all his own way."

There were shouts of agreement.

The Abbot called for order. "Please! Our first concern is the safety of every creature here. We must stay where it is safe. There are plenty of stores. The cupboards and larders are well stocked, there is ample food in the kitchens and we have the entire stock of the wine cellar available. I have spoken to Brother Trugg and the only shortage will be fresh water. It must be used only for drinking. Bathing, washing and other uses are forbidden."

There was a lusty cheer from Rollo and some other young ones camped beneath the table.

"I'm glad someone approves," Constance smiled. "Well, if that's all we'll just have to put up with the situation for a while."

"Put up with the situation indeed!" John Church-mouse snorted indignantly.

Cornflower laughed aloud. "Oh, John, you sounded just like my Matthias then."

At the mention of the Warrior's name a silence fell.

"I do hope our young ones are safe," Mrs. Church-mouse fretted. "When I think of my Tim and Tess and Sam Squirrel and Mattimeo and Cynthia, where they may be now, or what those villains may do to them. . . . Oh, I do hope Matthias brings them back safe to us."

She broke down in tears.

"There, there, m'dear," John said, patting her gently. "Don't you cry, they'll be all right."

Baby Rollo began patting her skirt from underneath the table, ducking in an imitation of John Churchmouse. "There, there, me dear. Don't oo cry, be all right."

Every creature laughed, and even Mrs. Churchmouse managed a smile through her tears.

Ambrose Spike lifted Rollo up onto the table. "Thaf s the stuff, old Rollo. You get all these wet blankets cheerful again. Right, whaf s next, you little ruffian, eh?"

The tiny bankvole wrinkled his nose, uttering a single word: "Plans!"

The hedgehog shook his head in admiration. "There

y'are, out of the mouths of baby beasts an' innocent creatures. Flans! Thaf s what Matthias would have said if he were here, stiffen me spikes. He wouldn't want us mopin' an' cryin'."

Cornflower stamped her paw down hard. "You're right, Ambrose. Let's get our thinking caps on. Thaf s if we ever want to walk freely around our own Abbey and pick our own fruit from our own orchard, or even just sit on the walls in peace and watch the sunrise over Redwall. I say, lef s not be beaten by a flock of birds!"

Constance touched a paw to her snout. "Ssshh! Let's do it quietly. You never know who may be listening."

While the badger was speaking, Winifred the Otter crept to the foot of the stairs that separated Cavern Hole from Great Hall, picking up a small turnip that baby Rollo had been playing with. Tip-pawing halfway up the stairs, she paused a moment then flung the turnip as hard'as she could.

Bonk!

There was a hollow noise of turnip striking beak, followed by a loud squawking caw.

Winifred nodded with satisfaction. "Good shot! Let him go and tell old Irontrousers about that!"

"If we are making plans, has any creature got a suggestion?" the Abbot asked, keeping his voice low.

"Hourr, oi'ave. If n you can't cross Gurt'all or goo out Abbey, whoi doant me'n moi moles runnel out?"

There was no doubting Foremole's logic, as Constance was first to agree.

"Splendid idea. There's no telling what we could do if we could tunnel out without Ironbeak knowing. However, I was thinking of what he said last night. If he means to conquer Redwall, he must attack us down here sooner or later. It will become fairly obvious to him that we have lots of food to keep us going, so in the event of not being able to starve us out, he'll attack Cavern Hole. I think we should barricade the stairs to keep them out."

There was unanimous agreement for the tunnel and the barricade, and the busy Redwallers set about their tasks with a will.

Out on the sunbaked wastelands, Matthias and his followers were slowed down from a brisk march to a shambling gait. Basil Stag Hare crossed his ears loosely over his head in an attempt to provide himself with some shade.

"Whew! CPyou know, I'll never look a hot scone in the face again, knowin' if s come out of a jolly old oven as hot as mis place."

Cheek tenderly pawed his dry nose. "Huh, quick march and follow me, lads. We should have travelled by night instead of listenin' to you, flopears."

Basil brushed at his drooping whiskers. "I'd give you a swift kick if I had the energy, young feller." .

A broad black shadow fell across Matthias, but he carried on, enjoying the shade without thinking where it had come from.

"Get down!"

The warrior mouse was thrown flat as Jess tackled him from behind. As he hit the dust, Matthias felt a rushing breeze pass over him. He turned over and looked up.

Two great buzzards circled overhead, wheeling and soaring as they waited for a chance to catch any creature off guard.

Log-a-Log fitted a stone to his sling as he sighed wearily, "Heat, thirst, desert, big birds. What next?"

The slings had little effect on the buzzards, as the great dark birds would see the stone coming and fly out of range with ease.

Oriando called a halt to the slinging. "Stop, stop! You're only wasting energy. Lef s ignore mem. Well, not exactly ignore them, if you know what I mean, but keep an eye on them. Matthias, you take the front of the column, I'll take the rear. If they get too close we might get the chance of a sword or axe strike, and thaf 11 put paid to them."

As if sensing what was going on below, the two buzzards grouped and attacked the center of the band. They dived so speedily no creature had a chance to do anything. There was a scream, and the two great hunting birds rose into the air with a wriggling shrew pinioned between them. From out of the-blue they were joined by a third big bird, who soared down with wings outstretched.

"Look, there's three of them now." "Thaf s no buzzard, ifs attacking them!" Butting into the buzzards like a battering ram, the strange bird drove them downwards, causing them to drop the shrew, who bumped to earth in a cloud of dust. Clawing and biting, the other bird, who was stockier and shorter than the buzzards, battered away with wing and talon, screeching loudly until it drove them off. Circling to make sure it had driven the predators away, the bird dived and landed next to Orlando. It was Sir Harry the Muse.

"Pray accept my apologies, sir, My conscience was bothering me, So I had to take to the air. And now I am back, as you see."

Matthias ran to greet the poetic owl. "Well timed, Sir Harry. Thank you for your help!" The

owl blinked at the sun.

"I'd sooner fly 'neath the moon.

I dread the hot afternoon,

The heaf s infernal and owls are nocturnal.

I hope the sun sets soon."

The shrew who had been caught by the buzzards was not badly injured. He opened his pouch and offered the owl half a shrewcake which he had been saving. Sir Harry accepted it gravely, bowed politely, then devoured it in a most undignified manner.

"Mmmff, 'sgood, scrumff, 'slovely!"

The poetic owl waddled along beside Matthias as the warrior mouse explained their position. ' "I'm afraid we're very low on supplies. We could only manage to feed you with the same amount as we are rationed to. Don't tell me you really suffered from conscience pangs, Sir Harry. You must have another reason for flying all this way to be with us."

"I'd call that a very smart guess. In fact, you've called my bluff. My reason, I must confess, Is not for food and stuff. I get tired of being alone, Can I come along with you? I've heard you talk of your home. Could I live at Redwall too?"

"Humph! Pesky bird would scoff us out of the blinkin' Abbey!" Basil snorted huffily.

Matthias glared reprovingly at the hare. "Basil! Courtesy and good manners cost us nothing."

The old hare blinked grumpily and unfolded his ears. "Oh well, in for an acorn, in for an oak. I s'pose it'd be all right for him to live at our Redwall. Huh, save me gettin' all the jolly blame any time a mouthful of food goes missin', wot?"

Sir Harry did a hop and a skip.

"I knew you'd see things my way. If s settled then, it's done. And if food goes missing I'll say, 'Blame me, sir, I'm the one.'"

"Don't worry, I will, old chap," Basil muttered under his breath.

Orlando reared up, shading his eyes with a big paw.

"I see a black shadow. Maybe that is the black line on the map. We should make it sometime about sunset."

Matthias pulled the map out. "Hmm yes, a sort of broad black band. I wonder what it is."

Basil was stil! muttering to himself, "Huh, soon find out, I s'pose. If if s anyttun' to eat, I'll bet that owl gets there first. Hmph, poetry indeed!"

Orlando's estimate was correct. It was just as the sun began dipping beyond the western horizon that they stood on the edge of the great gorge. They gazed awestruck at the massive fissure splitting the land asunder. Orlando and Matthias peered over the edge. "By the fur and claw! Look at that!" "How are we going to cross a gap that wide?" Sir Harry sat back on his tail feathers.

"Tho' I'm the most poetic of birds. Right now I'm lost for words!"

Log-a-Log whirled his sling and shot a stone down into the abyss. There was neither sound nor echo came back.

Orlando quoted the lines of the poem from memory:

"Shrink not from the barren land

Look below from where you stand,

This is where a stone may fall and make no sound at all."

Jabez shook his head in wonderment. "So this is what a broad black band on a map looks like."

37

Half-eaten fruit, some of it rotten, lay scattered between the upturned beds, torn sheets and stained walls of the once neat dormitory, and a window had been broken so that the magpies and rooks could fly in and out at will. The fighters of General Ironbeak had smashed the small wooden lockers and tables. They lay about in the wreckage, some sleeping, others eating. Ironbeak had taken the infirmary and sickbay as his headquarters. Mangjz explored the cupboards, poking his beak into Sister May's collection of herbal remedies.

"Yagga! Why do these stupid earthcrawlers keep dead leaves and grasses? They are not good to eat, so what use are they?"

Ironbeak perched on Sister May's wooden stool. "Who knows, Mangiz. That is nothing to do with our problem. I am certain that the earthcrawlers have plenty to eat and drink down in that place called Cavern Hole. The time is coming when we will have to think about an

attack. We will go in there and drag them out."

Mangiz stood on the medicine cupboard, shaking his head. "That would be like using a boulder to crush an ant, my General. I am sure there must be a better answer to your problem."

"Then tell me, Mangiz. You are my seer. Are the

pictures becoming clear in your mind again?"

"My vision is still clouded by the mouse that wears armour, but I am not relying on dreams and visions; soon now I will think of an idea."

"Kacha! Then think quickly, Mangiz/ or the summer will be gone. When the brown leaves blow and the wind becomes cold, I want those earthcrawlers to be only a memory as I rule in my great redstone house."

Foremole had wasted no time. He and his crew had

tunnelled through from Cavern Hole to the grounds.

They emerged by the west wall, poking their snouts out

into the sunlight. "Hurr hurr, you'm may's well try an' keep waiter in a

sieve as stop'n uz moles agoen whurr we do please." "Aye, Jarge, whyrr to naow?" "Oi'm a-thinken us'd best tunnel to pool." "Burr, then to Miz Cornfl'er's liddle 'ouse by yon gate." "Doant ee forget a noice deep'n to orchard." Soon a veritable network of tunnels was under

construction.

Rollo was not too pleased. They had taken the big table for the barricade and now he had nowhere to camp. He soon cheered up when Ambrose Spike allowed him to help with the hammering and nailing of the barrier. Chairs and benches, cupboards and shelves, together with the large banqueting table, were placed across the bottom step of Cavern Hole. Ambrose and Winifred had given it a lot of thought. There were spaces to fire arrows through, slits for javelins and spears, plus a form that the defenders could stand upon to sling stones over the top at the enemy.

The Abbot and Sister May had done a thorough stocktaking of all food in the larders and drink in the wine cellar, and there was little danger of provision shortage.

Constance checked the weaponry. Besides the stand-

ard arms, there were lots of kitchen utensils that could double as fearsome implements of war. The badger brandished a copper-bottomed saucepan thoughtfully.

"What d'you think. Cornflower?"

"It would make quite a fetching war helmet for you, Constance."

Brother Sedge snatched it from the badger. "D'you want Mossflower vegetable stew with dumplings or not?" he asked crossly.

"Oh, sorry, I didn't know you were planning to use that saucepan."

"Here, take this rolling pin. If 11 make a useful club. And put that frying pan down, please. I'm cooking redcurrant pancakes with apple slices," Brother Sedge told the badger indignantly.

"Oh, er, right! Is this pan all right to borrow?"

"Perfectly. Then I won't have to make any hazelnut cream sauce to pour over my pancakes."

Constance put the pan down quickly. "No hazelnut cream sauce, unthinkable! Brother Sedge, I've just had a splendid idea. Why don't you invite the birds down to lunch and feed them to death. Hahaha!"

Brother Sedge picked up a ladle aggressively. "Are you insulting my cooking, badger?"

Cornflower shook with mirth. "Oh dear, no. I'm sure she meant the remark as a compliment. Come on. Constance, lef s see if any of the gardening tools can be of use to us."

They retreated chuckling as Brother Sedge sliced apples savagely.

Foremole reappeared through the tunnel entrance into

Cavern Hole, He waved to the Abbot. "Looldt yurr, 'dalfus zurr, fresh watter aplenty!" Motes climbed out, bearing buckets of water on poles

between them - proof that the tunnel to the pond had

been completed. The Abbot was well pleased. "Thank you, Foremole.

Now we have all we need. Look, Mrs. Churchmouse, fresh water, as much as we need."

Mrs. Churchmouse rolled her sleeves up busily. "Wonderful! I think if s high time for somebeast to get a bath."

Rollo gave a yelp of dismay and tried to crawl into the tunnel, but he met Gaffer, who was climbing out.

"Urr you'm be, marm. You scrub that liddle feller noice an' clean naow."

Baby Rollo was carried off protesting loudly, "I wanna be a mole. Moles don't get baffed!"

Mangiz had been thinking very hard. "My General, last time I was in the galleries of Great Hall I saw the mouse in armour. He was not a real live mouse, but a picture on a great doth that is fastened to the wall. The earthcrawlers must value him highly."

"What if they do, Mangiz? A piece of cloth is a piece of cloth. How can this help us?"

"Maybe they value him highly enough to defend him."

"What is going on in your head, my Mangiz? Tell me."

"I am thinking that we will not have to attack the

earthcrawlers. If they saw us trying to take the big doth

with the picture of the mouse on, they would come out

and attack us to save it."

Ironbeak clacked his beak together sharply. "Chakka! We would catch them out in the open. This is a good plan. Mangiz, you are my strong right wing."

The sun slanted through the windows of Redwall Abbey. It shone on the large tapestry in the peace and quiet of Great Hall.

BOOK THREE

Malkariss

294

The arrival of a cool summer morning did not make the gorge look any less wide.

Jabez Spike shook his head despairingly. " 'Twould be simpler to float a stone across a river than to get all these creatures across that great dark pit."

Breakfast was frugal and the water ration had run low. They ate and drank in silence. Basil Stag Hare looked longingly at the bushes and vegetation on the opposite side.

"I'll wager there's tender young plants and lots of water over there, wot?" he said wistfully.

Cheek gulped his water ration in a single swig. "Wish you'd stop goin' on about food'n'water, Basil. Otters need water more than some old dried up twig of a hare, /know,"

Orlando strolled moodily round the blackened stakes that had held the bridge. "That fox! He really thought of everything, didn't he?"

Jess had a faraway look in her eyes. She stroked her tail thoughtfully before peering over the edge of the gorge.

"Hmm, chopped the bridge off completely at both sides, did he? Hmm. Matthias, do you think

our owl friend could fly down into the ravine and cast his eye about for the remains of the bridge? I've got an idea."

297

Matthias looked inquiringly at Sir Harry. The owl stretched his impressive wings.

"The work of a moment, dear sir, To a useful fellow like me. I'll chance a flight down there. We'll see what we shall see."

The sunlight shone through his outspread wings as he executed a graceful soaring motion. Diving swiftly, he was soon lost to view within the dark abyss.

Jess instructed Orlando on the next part of her plan.

"Lend me your battleaxe, big fellow. Oof! On second thought, you hold it. Now do as I tell you. Stand it upright against those stakes which held the bridge. Good! Log-a-Log, could you bring some rope?"

The shrew leader rummaged about until he found a small coil. "Here's your rope, but there isn't enough to get us a fraction of the way across that gap."

Jess uncoiled the rope. "I have no intention of trying to cross with this piece, Orlando. Hold the axe still while I lash it to the stakes."

Sir Hany reappeared over the edge.

"This is your lucky day.

I'll tell you what I found

As I was winging my way

Far below the ground.

The bridge cast over the edge,

Complete with slats and all,

Hangs from a rocky shelf

Which juts from the canyon wall."

Jess secured the axe bolt upright. "Well done! I knew a long wiggly thing like a rope bridge couldn't fall far without getting caught on something. I don't want the slats; they're not part of my plan. Can you bring me one of the long ropes? Do you need a knife?"

Sir Harry blinked indignantly.

"What need of a blade have I? No sword or knife do I seek. I am monarch of the sky, With fearsome talon and beak!"

With a hoot and a whoosh he shot back into the depths.

Jess shrugged apologetically. "Hope I haven't offended him."

Slagar glanced around nervously. They were passing through pleasant brush country, mainly bushes and shrubs, with the odd tree dotted here and there. The whole area gave Mattimeo the impression that once long ago it had been gardened, cared for and cultivated. He walked in line with his friends, along what appeared to have been the path of a terrace. Flowers still

grew in dumps, and rocks ran in a straight line, probably bedded there by some industrious creatures in the dim past.

Tess spoke into his ear from behind, the sudden sound causing Mattimeo to jump slightly.

"Why are there no birds singing?" she asked.

The young mouse was mystified. "You're right, Tess. I couldn't say what made me uneasy about this place at first, but you've put your paw slap on it! There's no sound, no noise of grasshoppers, birds, the things you'd normally expect to hear on a bright summer's day. Even Slagar doesn't look too happy with this place."

Tess clinked her chain manacles gently. The sound hung on the still air.

"It is beautiful though. I'd like to stop and sit here awhile. Do you know, it reminds me somehow of our Abbey. Look, there are ripe berry bushes over there, and daisies and roses too."

Sam, who was in the front, stared ahead into the distance. "I can see two tall rocks shaped like a badger's head and a big bell."

"Silence back there, or you won't live to see nightfall. Pick those paws up and march faster!"

Vitch obeyed unconsciously, speeding up until he overtook his leader.

Slagar cuffed him bad-temperedly. "Where d'you think you're running to? Get back and watch those prisoners, and keep from under my paws, rat."

Orlando looked doubtfully at the contraption Jess had set up. High over his head the thick

bridge rope was fastened to his axe top. The rope ran out across the abyss, taking a steep downward slope until it reached the stakes on the far side, where Sir Harry had secured it close to ground level. The big badger scratched his muzzle.

"How's it supposed to work, Jess?" he asked dubiously.

"Quite simply. Matthias, would you go first and show him?"

The warrior mouse shinnied swiftly up the stakes. Removing his belt, he swung it over the rope with one paw, catching the other end as it came down. He stood with his paws twined in the belt that hung either side of the bridge rope.

"Ready, Jess," he called.

The squirrel climbed up and gave him a good push.

Whizzing across the gorge from the rope lashed around the axehead, Matthias sped on a straight downward course, lifting his tail clear as he hit the other side in a cloud of dust. He jumped to his paws, waving triumphantly. Log-a-Log and his shrews cheered aloud.

Jess turned to Orlando with a smile. "Thafs how!"

"I'm not sure, Jess. I might be too big arid heavy."

"Then you can go next to last/' the squirrel said decisively.

"Who's going last?"

"Me, of course. You want your axe back, don't you? Right then. I'll untie the rope, lash your axe to my back and swing across. Don't worry, I'm a good treeflyer. I'll go straight down into the gorge on the end of the rope, stop myself against the opposite wall and climb up."

Orlando wiped a dusty paw across his brow. "I'm glad if s you and not me trying that. By the way, please take care not to lose my battleaxe down there."

"Oh, stop fussing, you great lump, and help that shrew up on to the rope."

Jess's plan worked well and the operation went smoothly, though with one or two minor hitches. Sir Harry was kept busy flying to and fro to borrow belts for those who had none. When Orlando's turn came he persevered bravely. However, his size and weight caused the axe handle to bend and the rope to belly. The badger was stuck in the middle, hanging perilously over the abyss. He was moved by Matthias and his friends throwing their weight on and off the rope until it began to twang and vibrate, and Orlando moved slowly along it. At the edge, he had to be hauled over the brink by Basil, Cheek and several shrews. When it was her turn to go, last of all, Jess the champion squirrel of Redwall did the crossing in swashbuckling style. Untying the rope, she bound Orlando's axe to her back and leapt straight into the gorge, grasping the end of the bridge rope. Down she sped, suddenly snapping to a halt, then with practised skill she swung across and bounded up the rope, paw over paw.

"Here, Orlando," she panted, "hurry and get this dumping great hatchet off my back. I can't stand straight with the weight of it."

"I'll leave you tied to it if you call it a hatchet again, squirrel."

The pool among the bushes was like a cool oasis. They washed the dust off, bathing and splashing in the clear water. All save Jabez Stump, who sat munching cow parsley.

" 'Tain't natural, bathin', otherwise we'd have all been born fishes," the hedgehog objected.

The foragers found plenty of berries, fruit and plants.

even a crabapple tree laden with tiny golden crabapples. The friends lounged about, eating and dozing, almost reluctant to leave this haven of plenty.

Log-a-Log nibbled wild celery as he made his report to Matthias.

"The scouts have picked up the trail, going south as usual. If s easy to follow."

Matthias nodded, studying the map and the poem. "Aye, it looks like plain travelling. There's no obstacle ahead, unless you count these two rocks, the badger and the bell!"

39

"Constance, Abbot! Birds are trying to steal our tapestry!"

Brother Trugg tripped over his habit and fell as he dashed from the barricade where he had been standing sentry duty.

"Get slings, arrows and javelins. Pull the table aside quickly!"

The defenders rushed up the stairs into Great Hall.

Three magpies were struggling with the wall fastenings of the heavy tapestry. They ignored the charging animals, remaining intent on what they were about.

Before the Redwallers had a chance to marshal their forces and open fire, they were beset by birds. Rooks hurtled down from the galleries, pecking and clawing. General Ironbeak and Mangiz, leading a small force, dropped down behind them. Amid the confusion. Constance

saw what was happening: Ironbeak was trying to cut off their path back to Cavern Hole. She whirled, dealing a rook a heavy blow that sent it spinning as it buried its claws into her neckfur.

"Back, back. Return to Cavern Hole, everybeast. Hurry!" she ordered.

Two rooks were trying to drag Sister May off by the back of her habit, but John Churchmou&e thwacked them soundly with a javelin.

"Gaahh, scat! Come on. Sister, follow me!" he cried.

Calmly the little Sister shot off an arrow. "Got him! Ha, he won't sit down for a season. Take that, you horrible bird! Oh, right. Come on, Mr. Churchmouse, I'll protect you."

Ambrose Spike took a run at a group of birds who were attacking Cornflower. Curling himself tight, he went spinning into them like a flying ball of needles, and they rose to the air, squawking.

Constance lashed about with a frying pan, the weapon making a loud bong every time she scored a hit.

"Get out of our Abbey, you scavengers!"

Bong!

"Look out behind you, Abbot!"

Bong/

Constance hurtled at Ironbeak and Mangiz. The sight of the large badger with teeth bared made them jump to one side. She growled and snarled like a wild beast, charging them recklessly so that they had to take to the air. The other birds followed their leaders' example.

Winifred the Otter saw the way clear to Cavern Hole.

"This way, everybeast!" she called.

They clattered down the stairs and slammed the table back into position and not a moment too soon. Ironbeak saw his trap had been foiled and he chased several birds down the stairs.

"After them! They must not escape!"

Winifred and Constance were waiting.

"Now!"

Two javelins shot from the arrow slits in the barricade. One rook fell slain. Another took the javelin in his leg. Hopping and cawing, he followed his fellow fighters up the stairs in a hasty retreat, the javelin clattering and dragging from the limb it had pierced.

Ambrose Spike pushed a form up to the defences. "Stand on this, you archers. See if you can fire across at those magpies."

Several of the Brothers and Sisters took their place and began loosing shafts at the thieves. The arrows fell miserably short, though they did have the effect of deterring other attackers from coming down the stairs.

Constance slammed a heavy paw against the wall. "The thieving, pilfering barbarians, how dare they steal our Warrior's tapestry!"

Foremole tugged at her fur. " 'scusin' oi, marm. Whoi doant ee use our tunnels?"

"Tunnels? But how? What good would that do?"

"Hurr, you'm could come at um throo main door. They baint be aspecten that."

"Of course. What a great idea!" Constance exclaimed. "Half of you stay here with the Abbot, I'll take the rest through the runnel to the nearest exit outside. If we're sharp enough we can launch a surprise attack on those magpies, seize the tapestry, and go out of the Abbey and straight down the tunnel back to here. Come on, Winifred, Ambrose, Cornflower; and, Foremole, would you come too with some of your moles?"

"Surpintly, marm. Uz'll give um boi okey, hurr that uz will!"

"I come, I come. Me too!"

"Nay, young maister Rollyo, you'n stay boi yurr an' shoot arrers."

Quickbill and his brothers were loosening the final fastenings, General Ironbeak and his fighters were on the floor of Great Hall, and they hid each side of the wall at the top of the stairs, waiting for another foray from Cavern Hole.

"Chakka! Block these stairs well next time, and we will have them out in the open. You, Grubclaw, and you, Ragwing, stay by me. Try to get the big stripedog in the eyes."

Diptafl and Brightback undid the last loop from its hook on the wall. The large tapestry slid down to the floor.

"Yaggah! We have it, brothers!"

3lt;gt;5

"Redwaaaaall!"

Constance came thundering down upon them from the open doorway. Diptail lost his proud tail feathers with one sweep of a blunt paw. Brightback and Quickbill shot into the air like startled flies. Cornflower, Ambrose and Winifred hurriedly rolled up the tapestry while Foremole and his crew stood whirling slings.

Mangiz spotted them. "Kragga! The earthcrawlers are over there, Ironbeak!"

The raven General sprang forward, followed by his rooks. Unwittingly they exposed their backs to the stairs, A hail of arrows and slingstones from the barricade behind them caught the birds unawares. Ironbeak dodged out of the line of fire, his eye smarting from a pebblestone.

"After them! This way, you wormheads, away from the stairs!"

They were halfway across Great Hall when the main door slammed and the tapestry rescue party were gone.

The fuming Ironbeak laid about with his hard yellow beak.

"Useless, stupid blunderers! Worthless, dumping idiots! Where are those chicken-hearted magpies? Quickbill, take those blockhead brothers of yours outside and see where the earthcrawlers have got to."

The Abbot smiled with pleasure and relief as the long roll of tapestry was fed out of the hole by the moles. . "You acted courageously, my friends. Martin is certainly back among us."

Cornflower turned to Foremole. "Is there a tunnel through to my gatehouse cottage?"

Foremole tugged his snout. "Aye, missus. Oi dug it meself."

"Splendid. Sister May, would you come with me tonight? We may as well make use of the tunnels. I have an idea. It may not defeat Ironbeak, but it will certainly give him and those birds something to think about."

Baby Rollo rolled himself in the tapestry and giggled as Gaffer mole tickled him. John Churchmouse looked 'severely over the top of his glasses.

"Come out of there this instant, Rollo. What would Martin think?"

Mrs. Churchmouse chuckled. "He'd probably think it quite nice to have some company after hanging alone on the wall all that time."

General Ironbeak was in a fine fit of rage as he stalked up and down the sickbay and the infirmary. Mangiz and the three magpie brothers stood stock-still, waiting for his wrath to unleash itself upon them. They had failed to find any trace of the exits and entrances to the cunningly dug mole tunnels.

"Kacha! You slugbrained dolts, do you mean to tell me that you could not find a few creatures carrying the big cloth?"

Quickbill looked down at his claws. "We searched, we looked everywhere, Ironbeak. There was not a sign of any creature."

"Not a sign? You speak foolishness. They are earth-crawlers, not birds. They could not fly off into the blue. Where did they go?"

"The big stripedog charged us. General. We could not fight it. By the time you sent us outside, we could not find any trace of them. We did not expect them to come through the doorway like that. You were supposed to have them penned up in that place by the stairs."

Ironbeak moved like lightning. He pulled Quickbill up against the wall and felled him with a sharp blow from his heavy beak.

"Yaggah! Don't tell me what I was supposed to be doing. You forget yourself, magpie. I am the leader. Mangiz, do your visions see anything? Does your mind's eye tell you where the earthcrawlers went?"

The crow shifted nervously. "My visions are still clouded, Lord."

The raven eyed him scornfully. "Yaeh! Not the mouse warrior again?"

"Ironbeak, I see what I see. The mouse wearing armour blocks my visions and hovers in my thoughts. I cannot explain it."

"Ha&tt! Is this the Mangiz who served me in the northlands? I think this redstone house is making you like an old thrush. The mouse is only a picture upon a piece of cloth. We have seen this, we know it is true. I have not seen a mouse in armour striding around here, nor have you, yet you stand there dithering and flapping. 'Lord, my visions are clouded. A mouse wearing armour hovers in my thoughts.' Kachal Get out of my sight. I will do my own thinking. You have foiled me, Mangiz."

As Mangiz turned to go, there was a scratching and chirping in the doorway. Ironbeak leapt forward.

"Sparrows! Get them!"

The five sparrows who had been listening at the door flew off. Ironbeak and Mangiz were in hot pursuit of them as they rounded the stairwell and flew down towards Great Hall.

"Sparrows! Get them!" Mangiz echoed his leader's cry to the patrols in the galleries.

The sparrows fluttered and veered, not certain of where to go next. One of them was taken by the beaks and claws of three rooks. It stood no chance.

"Sparra, Sparra, down here!" the voice of Constance boomed up from Cavern Hole.

Like four arrows straight and true, the Sparra warriors shot down the stairs and over the top of the barricade, to land safely among their Redwall friends. A lively volley of slingstones discouraged any pursuit by Ironbeak's fighters.

All the Abbey creatures gathered in Cavern Hole to hear the report of the four survivors who were all that was left

of Queen Warbeak's brave little army. They told of the long days searching fruitlessly down false trails through 'the thicknesses of Mossflower country in the far south, of hawk attacks and uneasy nights spent in strange trees, of all their adventures, right to the time they found Matthias and his friends in dire peril. There followed a harrowing tale of the hard-won battle, culminating in the death of Queen Warbeak and nearly all her command. Many Redwallers wept unashamedly, for Warbeak and her warriors were great friends and true Redwallers.

There was heartfelt relief and the sadness gave way to cheers at the news that Matthias, Basil and Jess, together with old shrew comrades and some new companions, were alive and well, still hot on the trail of the evil one and his band who had kidnapped the young ones from the Abbey.

The Abbot ordered food to be brought for the weary sparrows, who had flown night and day to be back at Redwall, then he informed them of developments since they had left: the arrival of General Ironbeak and the slaying of the old Sparra folk and the nestlings by the ruthless invaders.

One of the sparrows related what they had heard outside the infirmary door.

Cornflower dapped her paws together. "I knew it. I was right! Martin the Warrior is watching over us. Oh, I'm so glad I thought up a little plan earlier on. This makes it so much better, knowing that those villainous birds are uneasy about the warrior's spirit protecting our Abbey. Now I think my scheme will really work!"

"I think you should tell us what this plan is before you decide to go off doing things by yourself, young mouse," the Abbot said firmly.

Cornflower explained.

Mangiz perched in the galleries with Ironbeak. Both birds were watching the floor of Great Hall below.

"General, do you think those sparrows heard us talking?" Mangiz wondered.

Who cares about a few sparrows? You see, Mangiz, you are worrying about stupid things. It is as I said, you are becoming wary of your own wingshadow now. Leave me alone, since it is I who now has to do all the thinking. You must not bother me with talk of sparrows and armoured mice."

"So be it, Lord."

Mangiz flapped off to the dormitories in a sulk.

Ambrose Spike and Brother Dan selected a long barrel stave and set about carving it with their woodworking tools. As he worked, the hedgehog muttered, "A sword, like the great sword of Martin that Matthias carries. Wish I had it here as a model. Still, I can remember fairly well what it looks like."

"I can recall the exact details of our Warrior's sword, fortunately," Brother Dan sniffed.

Ambrose sniffed back at him. "See that barrel of October ale yonder? I've got to remember to tap it before autumn. See those barrels of cider, I've got to remember to add honey to them in a day or so, or they'll go bitter. Now that big barrel of strawberry cordial, well, I've got to remember to strain it off into jugs for the evenin' meal tonight so that if 11 be cold and clear. So you carry on recallin' what you like about the Warrior's sword, Dan. I've got enough to remejpber, thank you."

Evening was falling with a glorious red sunset as Cornflower and Sister May, accompanied by several moles, slipped from the tunnel exit into the gatehouse cottage. Barring the door, Foremole checked at the windows to make sure they had not been seen. "Nary a sign o' burdbags, missus. We'm be safe enuff." Cornflower went into the bedroom and opened the chest where Matthias kept his warrior's garb.

"See, if s all here. Sister May, the armour and everything. All my Matthias took was his sword. He likes to travel light."

Sister May helped Cornflower to unpack the helmet and greaves. Laying the burnished breastplate upon the bed, she eyed it doubtfully.

"Dearie me, if s all very heavy. Are you sure you'll manage to walk with it on?"

Cornflower shrugged, "I won't know until I try, but I'm fairly strong. Give me a paw with this shoulderplate, will you."

Shortly afterwards, she clanked out into the living room, fully armoured.

Foremole shook his head admiringly. "Burr, you'm lookenasoighta'right, missus. Oi never see'd ought loik that. Strewth, but for your face oi'd say 'twas Marthen a-cummed back agin."

Sister May emerged, carrying a piece of filmy gauze. "Not to worry, Mr. Foremole. I'll make a face mask, and in the dark she'll seem quite pale and ghostly. I must say, Cornflower, all that bulky armour makes you look quite large and impressive."

Cornflower clanked about, gazing down at the gleaming metal.

"Lef s hope it fools the birds tonight."

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Basil dodged about in the rays of the setting sun.

"I say, look you chaps, this must have been a herb garden. Aha, mint. Yumyum, I'm rather partial to a bit of fresh mint. Achoo! Bless me, there's thyme around here somewhere. It always makes me sneeze. Achoo! Ah, here 'tis, hmm, very tasty too. Achoo!"

The trackers were camped in the old cultivated garden land, shrew fires burned red against the twilight, and a delicious aroma permeated the air. Cheek took a taste from the end of a ladle. "Gaw, marvellous. What is it?"

Log-a-Log chopped wild chicory with his sword and threw it in the pot. "Thaf s special. There's so much still growing round here that we have a wide choice. I'm calling it hunters' hotpot. There's only water to drink, but I'm making apple fritters in honey to follow."

Jess Squirrel looked over towards the twin black silhouettes of the badger and bell rocks in the distance.

"What an amazing sight, Matthias. You'd think for all the world that those shapes were real."

Matthias was busy with Jabez Stump and Sir Harry. They were studying the map and poem again.

"Well, thaf s the badger and the bell, but this next part sounds pretty desperate:

'Face the Lord who points the way

After noon on summer's day.

Death will open up its grave.

Who goes there. . .? None but the brave,'"

They sat in silence around the fire, weighing the ominous words.

Sir Harry waddled across to sniff the aromas of the cooking pot, and returned heartened.

"Dread words do not alarm me When food is on its way. No parchment threat can harm me. Lead on, lead on, I say."

Basil gobbled a lettuce leaf. "Well spoken, me old featherface, I feel exactly the same. I can face death after dinner any time; only thing bothers me is that I might miss tea and supper, wot?"

Robbed of his noble moment, the owl glared at Basil and stalked off.

Matthias tapped the map. "This thing here bothers me. It's like two lines, one at an angle to the other, with sort of little splinters sticking off all along it."

Log-a-Log banged the side of the pot with the ladle. "Come on, come on, never mind death and doom and mysteries, this hotpof s ready. Form a line. No shoving in ahead, Basil. Get to the back, go on!"

Amid much jollity and laughter the shrews lined up with Matthias and his friends to be served. Basil was eagerly holding his bowl out for a portion of the hunters' hotpot when an eerie voice rang out:

"Doom! Doooooooooommmm!"

Log-a-Log paused, the ladle deep in the pot. "What was that?"

Basil waggled his bowl. "Don't know, old chap. Fill the bowl, please, there's a good fellah."

Matthias and Orlando grabbed their weapons, but a call from Cheek reassured them:

"It's all right. An old rabbit's showed up over here."

The newcomer was an ancient rabbit. He even had a wispy white beard. He staggered into the firelight, waving his paws and shouting in a wavery voice:

"Doom, death, destruction and darkness. Doom, I say. Doooom!"

Basil waggled his ears at the ancient one. "I say, old chap, push off and let a bloke have his hotpot, will you."

They gathered around the rabbit. Matthias bowed to him.

"I am Matthias the Warrior of Redwall and these are my friends. We mean you no harm. What is your name, sir, and what is this place called?"

The rabbit stared straight ahead. "Doom. All about me is doom!"

"Oh, give your whiskers a rest, you old fogey," Basil called out as he nudged Log-a-Log to use his ladle, "or I'll never get served. Doom, doom, death'n'destruction! Can't you say anything that doesn't begin with a D?"

The old rabbit slumped down, his limbs trembling with age. Matthias placed his bowl of food in front of the rabbit and draped a sack about his shaking form. The creature ignored the food and continued his mutterings of death and doom. Cheek peered closely at the old rabbit.

"He's fuddled. Got a headful of black dust," he remarked.

Basil gave the otter a stern glance. "Mind your manners in front of your elders."

Matthias turned the same stem glance upon Basil. "Listen to the pot calling the kettle black. You don't seem to be setting Cheek much of an example."

The warrior mouse squatted down in front of the old one, pointing to the tall rocks. 'Tell me, sir, what lies beyond those rocks?"

For the first time the rabbit appeared to hear the question. He looked towards the badger and the bell, shaking his head.

"Death and darkness, terror and evil!" he intoned, then fell silent and would say no more.

Orlando leaned upon his axe. "It's no use, Matthias, the poor old fellow is frightened out of his wits. Leave him there with that sack and the food. Perhaps he might come round later and talk to us."

)ess Squirrel shook her tail. "I wonder what caused him to be like this. It must be something pretty awful to make a creature behave so. Look, Matthias, he's getting up."

The old rabbit rose slowly. Walking towards Matthias, he stroked the sack that was draped about him as if it was some kind of comforting robe. Halting in front of the warrior mouse, the ancient one untied a woven grass binder from his paw. A piece of stone dangled from it. Without a word he pressed the object into Matthias's paws and wandered off into the night,

clutching the sack about him like a cloak. Log-a-Log and Jabez intercepted him, but Matthias motioned them away.

"Let him go, poor creature. He seems to be very fond of that sack. Maybe he gave me this in exchange for it."

Basil inspected the stone hanging from its grass bracelet. "Funny-lookin' doodah. What d'you suppose it is?"

"I've no idea. It looks like the model of a small stone mouse. Probably some kind of ornament that he wished to give us in exchange for our hospitality."

The warrior mouse looped it about his sword belt and sat down to finish the evening meal with his friends.

The half-moon gleamed fitfully down on the scene at the foot of the tall rocks. The summer night was warm, but eerie and silent. Jube whimpered in his sleep, and Tess stroked his head until he fell silent. Auma stared up at the strange gloomy rocks rising like twin sentinels in the darkness.

"I don't like it here," she said, shuddering. "All my life I lived by the mountains of the Western Plains. They were sunny and friendly; these are not."

Tim reached out and touched the rock wall, which was still warm from the sun.

"They're only rocks like any others. If s just that nature shaped diem differently/' he reassured her.

"Quiet there! Get those eyes shut and sleep, or you'll feel my cane."

Threedaws strolled by swinging his willow withe. He checked that they were still and silent before moving on to join Slagar.

The Sly One stood between the rocks, his silken mask making a splash of colour against their dark surface. He turned at Threedaws' approach.

"All still?"

"Aye, they're quiet enough, Chief."

"Good. We'll soon be rid of them."

"Where is this place you're taking them, Slagar?"

"Are you questioning me, Threedaws?" the fox asked sharply.

"No, Chief. I just can't help wondering when all this marching's going to stop and when it does, where we will be."

"Don't worry, Threeclaws, I'll take care of you and the rest. I'm telling you this because I know I can trust you. Listen, mate, you've been the one I could always rely on. Some of those others, especially Halftail and that little Vitch, need watching. Pretty soon now I'll be gone for a day or two. I want you to do something for me: keep an eye on them. I'll leave you in charge."

Threedaws felt proud and pleased with himself. He had never heard the masked fox call anybeast "mate." He felt privileged, standing and talking to the leader as if they were both equals.

"Leave it to me, Chief. I'll watch them when you're away. Huh, Halftail and Vitch, a stoat and a rat, who'd trust them? You need a good loyal weasel like me."

Slagar patted Threedaws on the back.

"You took the words right out of my mouth, Three-claws," he chuckled. "You're the weasel for me. Listen,

when all this is over I'll need a good fellow at my right

paw to share a lot of power and riches. Is it a bargain?" The weasel shook Slagar heartily by the paw. "A

bargain. Chief. Rely on me!" "I do. Now go and keep a watch on that lot." Threedaws saluted smartly and marched off with his

head high. "Fool!" Slagar sneered beneath the silken hood as he

watched the weasel go.

Halftail was slumbering against the bell rock when Slagar stirred him.

The stoat tried to give the impression that he was alert. "Is that you. Chief? I was just lying quiet here, watching the captives," he pretended.

"Good, good. I've often noticed that you're the one who stays awake and keeps a check on things, Halftail."

"You have? Oh, er, yes, well. Somebeast has to do it, I suppose."

"I know I can depend on you. I often say to myself, if 11 be all right for me to take a nap, Halftail's looking after things. Listen to me, my good friend. I'll have to take a short trip soon.

I'll leave you in charge here, but don't say anything. I want you to watch Threedaws carefully. He's been getting a bit big for his fur lately. I don't trust him,"

Halftail nodded wisely. "Don't think I haven't noticed it too, Chief. Those weasels are all the same, I've never trusted them."

"Thaf s because you're like me, Halftail. You've got sense and you're a natural leader. You stick with me, friend, and I'll see that you're well rewarded. I'll take care of you."

Halftail opened his eyes wide. "You mean it, Slagar?"

"Of course I do. Faithful service should always be well rewarded. By the way, have you seen Vitch about?"

"Yes, he's over there by those bushes."

"Right, I'll go and have a word with him. I may need to

take him with me for a day or two. Remember now, mouth shut, eyes open. I'm counting on you, Halftail." "You can trust me, Slagar."

The Sly One sat down by Vitch beneath the bushes. The young rat drew back slightly, afraid of Slagar.

"Listen carefully, Vitch, I have something to tell you."

"But Slagar, I haven't done anything wrong, I've been wa"

"Quiet, Vitch. Keep your voice down. I know you've done nothing wrong, in fact you've been very good lately."

"I have? Oh, I have. I've been keeping those Red-wallers on their paws, and the others too. I make them march as fast as they can go."

"Yes, I know you do," the masked fox said silkily. "That's why I've got a surprise for you. Now very shortly I'll be leaving here and taking the slave line with me, but I must leave the others to wait here until I return. This is where you come in, Vitch. I want you to come with me to help with our captives. Meanwhile, tell Scringe and the rest to keep an eye on Threeclaws and Halftail. I think those two are plotting behind our backs, Vitch. They're not to be trusted."

The little rat dropped his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "Threeclaws and Halftail, those two bullies, they're always pickin' on me. I thought they were up to something. You leave it to me, I'll tell Scringe and Skinpaw and the others to mark them well."

"You do that. We don't want them stirring up trouble while we're away, now do we?"

"Right! The dirty traitors. Er, where are we going. Chief?"

"I can't say too much right now, Vitch, but I'll tell you this much. I need a good assistant to give orders for me. It's a job for somebeast like yourself, the chance to prove you can handle power."

Vitch could not help rubbing his paws together with

excitement. "I'm the one for the job, Slagar. I'll prove it to you." "I know you will, Vitch. That* s why I picked you."

Slagar crept away to resume his watch between the rocks, satisfied that he had laid his plans well. From the moonlit terraces below the badger and the bell, other eyes watched him through the warm summer night.

Slagar stood quite still, not daring to move a muscle. From out of the surrounding darkness grey rats had come silently. He was now surrounded by them. There was a vast army of the creatures, each one robed in black and carrying a short stabbing spear with a broad leaf-shaped blade. There was not a single sound from any of them. As well as he could, the Cruel One took stock of the situation.

The rats encircled the camp. Eyes glimmered in the bushes, spearblades shone everywhere, around both the tall rocks and in the narrow defile between. They far outnumbered Stonefleck's horde, which guarded the riverbanks. The masked fox had encountered them before when he had passed this way. He remained unmoving, awaiting a sign.

The creatures in front of him parted as a purple-robed rat came towards Slagar. This one did not carry a spear; in his paw he held a white bone sceptre surmounted by a mouse skull.

The rat spoke no word.

"You have come for the slaves. I was waiting for you, Nadaz," Slagar said, his voice sounding hollow in the silence.

The rat called Nadaz shook his sceptre. The skull rattled against its bone handle, and Slagar fell silent.

Nadaz pointed the sceptre at the fox then swept around to point it at the sleeping captives. Turning again, he pointed between the twin rocks, indicating the direction they would be taking.

Slagar nodded his understanding.

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Dark forms surrounded Mattimeo and those chained to the slave lines. The young mouse came half awake as he heard less give a muffled groan. Silent paws held his head still, and a pad of leaves holding the ashes of burned grass and herbs was pushed up against his mouth and nostrils. Mattimeo struggled, but the overpowering scent of the compress was too strong to

fight against. Dark mists roiled in front of his eyes as his body slumped limply against the folds of a black robe.

The senseless forms of the captives were placed on large oblong shields. Eight rats bore each shield. Vitch was awakened by a shake from Slagar, "Ssshh, don't make a sound. Follow me and keep quiet. We're on our way," the fox warned.

As Vitch rose, he accidentally stood on Damper's paw. The weasel awoke with a whimper. Seeing the captives being carried away, he jumped up. "Slagar! Where are they . . . aargh!" At a sign from Nadaz, one of the rats slew Damper with a swift thrust of his stabbing spear.

Vitch shook with terror as a bag was placed over his head. Slagar whispered to him as his own head and mask was enveloped, "Don't panic, they won't kill us. Just go where they direct you."

The silent army moved off south between the twin rocks with their unconscious captives and the two slavers.

The pale moon shone down on the body of Damper. He lay still in death, with his sleeping companions nearby unaware of what had taken place in the soft summer night.

The same moon mat shone over Mossflower sent silver grey shafts of light through the windows of Great Hall. Two rooks perched in the upper galleries on sentry duty. Half awake and half dozing, they stared down at the scene below. Dark shadows softened the corners of the stones, with lighter areas where the moonlight shone in.

One rook shifted his claws uncomfortably. "Graah! It is better in the day when the sun shines warm and bright."

His companion shook a wing to keep awake. "You are right. Rag wing. I do not like this place in the darkness."

"The earmcrawlers are all asleep down in that Cavern Hole place. Why do we have to stand about here all night? Nothing ever happens."

"Do not let the General hear you say that. If he says stay here all night, then we obey."

"Aye, you are right. When the darkness comes again two others will have to stay guard and we will sleep upon the soft beds of the earthcrawlers."

"Krakkah! They are good beds. There was nothing like them in the northlands."

"What is that, Grubdaw? Did you see something move down there?"

"Graah! It is only shadows."

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"No, over there. Look, the big door is open. See, something moves!"

Slowly emerging from a patch of deep shadow, a ghostly figure glided into a shaft of moonlight.

The two rook sentries stood thunderstruck.

It was a mouse in gleaming armour, the mouse from the big cloth!

The spectre turned to face them, but it had no face! There was just a grey misty area where the face should have been. Raising a fearsome-looking sword, it pointed directly at the fearbound birds and intoned in a deep booming voice:

"Death comes if you stay in Redwallllll!"

Before the echoes had finished rebounding around Great Hall, the panic-stricken birds had fled in terror, tumbling and bumping into each other in their haste to get away from the ghastly sight.

Ironbeak was shocked into wakefulness by Grubclaw and Ragwing. The infirmary door banged open wide as they hurtled through, feathers flying in all directions.

"General, Yaggah! Whoocaw! A ghost, a ghost!"

"Death, it said. Death! Kraggak! Save us!"

Ironbeak struck out with both wings, belaboring the rooks. "Silence, you thickheads! Mangiz, come with me. You two, quickly, show us where you saw this thing."

The four birds hurried through to the sentry post in the galleries.

Ragwing pointed a quivering claw. He was shaking uncontrollably. "Th-there-th-there-th-theretherethere!"

Ironbeak pushed him aside roughly. "Fool, I see nothing."

"We were here and all of a sudden there it was. Right there!" Grubclaw tried to explain.

Ironbeak stared down at the spot they were both pointing to. "Kraak! There isn't anything there! Right. You, Ragwing, tell me exactly what you saw, or I'll make you more frightened of me than any ghost you've ever

seen. Now stop yammering and stammering and talk slowly!"

"Well, Chief, me and Grubclaw were standing right here on sentry. We weren't sleeping, oh no, we were wide awake. Then I says to him "What's that moving down there?' and he says to me, 'It's only shadows.' Kraakh! When we looked again, there was a mouse, just like the warrior mouse on the big cloth, except this one had no face. It waved a sword at us, a big long sword, and it said, 'Death comes to you if you stay in Redwall.' That ghost spoke in a voice like no mouse. It was like thunder over the northland mountains, it was like, like"

Ironbeak waved his wing threateningly. "Enough! I have heard enough. A ghost of a mouse, eh?"

Grubclaw could not help himself calling out, "A m-mouse all in armour. Chief. With a big sword!"

Ironbeak zoomed over the galleries. Winging downwards, he landed on the floor.

"And this is where it stood. Well, do you see any ghost now, do you?" he asked, his voice echoing around Great Hall.

The two sentries shook their heads numbly.

Ironbeak called out, "Kraggah! Ghost! I am General Ironbeak, greatest fighter in all the northlands. Come, ghost, see if you can scare me!"

The raven stood boldly in the shaft of moonlight on the floor of Great Hall. Nothing happened.

"General, the big door is still open," Mangiz called down to him.

Ironbeak stalked outside. He looked around, then came in again. Slamming the door after him, he flew up to the galleries.

"You see, nothing inside, nothing outside. No mouse in armour, ghost, call it what you will. Nothing!"

He turned upon the two sentries, waggling his murderous beak under their eyes, his voice heavy with menace. "So, tell me again. What did you see?"

"Nothing," they said in fearful unison.

"Then who opened the big door?" Mangiz asked.

Ironbeak's eyes glittered with rage, as he nodded to the sentries. "Carry on guarding this place. Mangiz, we will go back to the room."

As the crow entered the infirmary, Ironbeak gave him a kick which sent him sprawling. Mangiz looked up in surprise. The General had struck other birds before, but never his seer. Ironbeak stood over him.

"This is all your doing, crow," he said, his voice thick with anger. "You and your clouded visions. Kacha! A ghost mouse wearing armour. Those rooks were scared witless. Then when I go and prove to them there is no ghost, what does my strong right wing have to say?"

Ironbeak imitated Mangjz's voice mockingly: " Then who opened the big door?"'

The crow cringed, trembling as the General continued:

"So, I show them there is no ghost and you start convincing diem there is one. I am no ghost, Mangiz, and what I say is final. I will teach you not to open your beak at the wrong time."

The crow screeched in anguish as the big raven's talons came down.

Ambrose Spike placed a bowl of hot celery and cream soup before Cornflower as Sister May

removed her helmet.

"Try some of this. It'll help keep your spirits up. Hohohoho!"

Constance held her sides, wiping tears of laughter from her eyes.

"Ohaha, oh dear! I must say you looked hauntingly beautiful in your armour tonight, Cornflower. Oh haha hee hee hee!"

Not intending a pun. Sister May remarked as she folded the gauze facemask, "I'm glad it worked. It goes to show you what can happen from the ghost of an idea - oh dear!"

They fell about laughing.

"Did you see their faces when you pointed the sword at them?"

"Hahaha. They kept bumping into each other when they tried to fly off together."

"That was thanks to Constance's ghost voice. It's enough to scare anybeast. Hohoho! Go on, Constance, do it again."

The big badger cupped her paws around her mouth and called in a sepulchral voice: "Leeeeaaave some of mat soooooooup for meeeee!"

Outside on the gallery sentry post, Ragwing shuddered

on his perch.

"What was that? Did you hear it, Grubdaw?" The other rook pecked his companion hard upon the

bottom. "Yak! Don't you start that again, you've got us into

enough trouble for one night. Now go to sleep. That way

you won't be able to see anything worth reporting with

your dim imagination."

There was dissension and mutiny in the camp of Slagar. The slavers woke to find the slaves and their leader gone. Worse followed when Drynose the weasel found the lifeless body of his comrade Damper.

"The filthy murdering fox, he's stabbed my mate Damper," he cried out.

Hafftail attempted to pacify him. "Rubbish! Slagar wouldn't kill one of his own."

"Hah! Well, what about Hairbelly and Wedgeback? He done 'em both in."

"Drynose is right. You keep out of it, Threeclaws. I'll bet you that lousy masked murderer has even killed little Vitch. Look around. Can you see Vitch?"

"Vitch isn't dead/' Scringe butted in. "Slagar's taken him along somewhere."

Halftail brandished a dagger at Scringe. "Somewhere? What d'you mean, somewhere? You've been spying and Ustenin' to things that don't concern you, Scringe. I think you're a dirty traitor."

"Dirty traitor, eh? Listen who's talkin'. You're the turncoat, bucko. Slagar told me to keep my eye on you. And don't you start waving that dagger at me, snot-whiskers. I've got a sword twice as big as that. Look!"

Halftail rushed Scringe as he tried to draw his sword.

Taken unawares, the ferret was easy prey to the stoaf s dagger. He fell mortally wounded. Halftail turned upon the rest.

"Thaf s what spies and traitors get. Anybeast want some? Come on!"

Threeclaws pulled out a vicious-looking hook. "Hey, Halftail. You've got a lot to say for yourself. Who do you think you are, the Chief?"

"I am, as far as you're concerned, weasel; Slagar left me in charge when he told me he'd be gone for a while."

Threeclaws brandished the hook, nodding to Fleaback and Drynose, and all three advanced slowly upon Halftail. Threeclaws grinned wickedly.

"Slagar left you in charge? Whose paw do you think you're trying to pull? He would have left one of us weasels in charge, wouldn't he, mates?"

Halftail snatched the sword from the dead Scringe. He swished it at them and jabbed with his dagger.

"Get back, weasels, leave me alone or there'll be real trouble when Slagar returns."

Threeclaws circled slowly, swinging the hook. "You must have bread for brains if you think the fox is coming back, you idiot. Why do you think he took the slaves with him? He's got no intentions of coming back. Ha! No wonder they call him the Sly One."

Drynose made a rush at Halftail. The stoat leapt to one side and spitted the weasel with his sword. He shouted an appeal to Bageye, the only other stoat in the group:

"Come on, Bageye. Slagar left me in charge, help me out, mate."

Before Bageye could rise to his paws, Wartdaw and Snakespur, two other weasels, jumped on him. Their iron hooks flashed once. "We've got this one. Three-daws, go on, finish Halftail!"

Halftail fought like a mad creature, he wounded Skinpaw and was about to finish him when Snakespur struck him from behind with his hook. Halftail was dead before he hit the ground.

The survivors of the mutiny sat about licking their wounds and eating any provisions they could find. Out of the crew that had taken the young ones from Mossflower there were only five weasels remaining, Skinpaw, Fleaback, Threeclaws, Wartclaw and Snake-spur. Undecided, they lounged about the camp. Three-claws fancied himself as leader, but after the slaughter that had taken place he decided to stay in the background lest one of the others challenge him for supremacy. Besides, who knew? Slagar might come back, and then there would really be trouble.

As if reading Threeclaws' thoughts, Snakespur grumbled aloud, "Deserted, thafs what we've been mates, deserted. That scurvy fox has left us in the lurch and gone off to get the reward for the captives himself. What makes me so mad is that we've followed him like a pack of fools all this time. 'Yes, Chief/ 'No, Chief.' Huh! Now where are we? Half a season's journey into the middle of nowhere, with empty paws and empty bellies too, by the look of those slack ration bags."

"But what about little Vitch," Fleaback interrupted. "I wonder whaf s happened to him?"

Snakespur slashed at the grass with his iron hook. "Dead as a pickled frog, for all I care. What's one rat or more got to do with us? We're weasels, mate. Oho, I tell you, I'd like to have

that fox's guts at the end of this hook right now,"

"Brave words from the scum of the earth!"

A large male badger had walked quietly into the camp. He stood testing the edge of a big double-headed battleaxe with his paw. The weasels leapt up, unsure of what to do against the huge warrior, without a leader to galvanize them into action.

Orlando gave a cold smile.

"Run or fight, eh, baby stealers?" His voice was deceptively calm. "I know you haven't the courage to fight. There's only five of you and not a gang. Ah well, if you're not going to fight then you must run like the

cowards you are. But even then you won't get far, because you're surrounded."

Matthias and his friends stepped from the bushes and the rocks.

Wartclaw began trembling violently. "It was Slagar. It was his idea. We don't even count. Look at the way he's deserted us."

Matthias pointed at the bodies of the fallen. 'Tell me, weasel, what happened here?"

"It was the masked fox. He did it!"

"You lie! We lay hidden and watched it all. You murdered your own comrades. Listen to me. If you do not speak the truth then you will all join them. Is that dear?"

The weasels nodded vigorously.

Jess Squirrel faced Skinpaw. "Where has Slagar taken the captives?"

"I know you're not going to believe me," the weasel moaned in despair, "but when we woke this morning he was gone. The prisoners too, and a rat named Vitch."

Matthias drew his sword. The five weasels began pleading:

"If s true, if s true!"

"Please, sir, believe us!"

"See that dead weasel there? He's Damper. We found him slain when we woke. He must have tried to stop Slagar leaving."

Log-a-Log drew Matthias aside and whispered, "He's probably telling the truth. My scouts have discovered tracks. They've been well covered, but there were rats here. Matthias, I'm not just speaking about a group; this was a horde, a mighty army."

The warrior mouse nodded. He turned to the five weasels.

"I believe you. Now try to remember, did any of you wake last night and see who was here?"

"No, sir, no."

"We were asleep."

"Slagar took the watch alone."

Basil picked up a rope and made five loops in it.

"Right, c'mere, you wicked weasel types. Put these nooses around your dirty necks. Stop blubberin', we ain't goin' to string you up. Though if s all you richly deserve, wot? Wretches! Now, we'll let you march up front. Isn't that good of us? That way you'll get the benefit of any bally old traps thaf ve been laid for us: poison arrows, swamps full of mad frogs, great eagles that rip your jolly old eyes out, an' suchlike. Cheer up, chaps, if 11 be fun!"

Cheek found Threeclaws' willow cane and gave it to Basil. "I say, a btinkin' fiogger. Is this what you keep the slaves goin' with, sort of give them the odd whack. Like this, and this, and this! Whack! Swish! Thwack!"

Matthias stopped Basil. There was a sound from the bushes, and the old rabbit tottered out, still wrapped in his sack. He walked round the captured weasels, staring at them with rheumy eyes.

"Death, death, is this all he left? Last time the masked one came this way none of his band lived. Dead, all slain!"

Matthias tried questioning him further, but he staggered off into the bushes, still moaning about death and doom.

Orlando watched the ancient one until he was lost to sight.

"Matthias, that one knows a lot more than we think. Did you hear him? He's seen Slagar passing through here once before. It must be an old game with the fox to pick out a band of vermin and promise them the sky, then when he gets near his destination he either dumps his helpers or slays 'em, one way or another. Then he's free to reap the rewards of his filthy trade all for himself."

"Yes," Matthias agreed, "but what does he get out of it? What is his reward?"

Orlando shrugged. "Maybe we'll find out when we catch up with him. One thing is dear; now that he's got

rid of his band he must be near the end of the journey. Though where that is, your guess is as good as mine."

Matthias stood between the two tall rocks. He drew out the parchment. "I hope this will take some of the guesswork out of it, friend."

He indicated the space between the badger and bell rocks. 'This is where we are now. Let me see, the poem says:

'See the badger and the bell,

Face the lord who points the way

After noon on summer's day.

Death will open up its grave.

Who goes there . . . ? None but the brave.'

Jabez squatted beside the bell rock. "Not long to go till afternoon. We'll rest here. Where's this lord who's supposed to be pointing the way?"

They gazed out at the country. It was mainly grassy hills dotted with scrub and groves of trees. In the late summer morning there was no indication of mystery, death or doom. It all looked fairly plain and harmless.

Orlando shook his head. "Well, whoever the lord is, he's not come out to show us anything yet. I'd best give a shout. He may be taking a nap."

The badger cupped his paws to his mouth and roared until the valley echoed:

"Hi, there! Are you listening, Lord? This is Orlando of the Axe from the Western Plains. Come out and show us the way!"

The echoes died on the summer air.

"No, no, you're doin' it all the wrong way, old stripetop," Basil chaffed Orlando. "Here, let a chap with a touch of breedin' have a jolly try."

Basil stood beyond the rocks. Throwing his head back, he yodelled out in a wobbly tenor.

"Hullo, there! I say, Lord old fellah, it's Basil, one of the Mossflower Stag Hares, doncha know. Listen, why

don't you toddle out an' point the way to me and my pals? Super wheeze, wot?"

The only sound that could be heard in reply was Orlando sniggering.

Matthias offered Basil a shrewcake, and he wandered off eating and dumtering to himself, "Confounded bad form, you'd think the rotter'd have the manners to answer a chap!"

jess was also muttering to herself. "'Afternoon on summer's day.' What part of the afternoon: midday, high noon, middle of noon, late noon? How are we supposed to know. Silly rhyme, if

you ask me. What d'you think. Matthias?"

"I think it means before the early evening, Jess. Look, the words are separate, it doesn't say 'afternoon,' it says 'after . . . noon'. Another thing, 'the lord ivho points the awy* doesn't have to be a living creature."

Jess looked puzzled. "How do you know that?"

"Easy. The badger and the bell are both rocks. We identified them by their shapes. So why can't the Lord who points the way be a rock?"

Cheek sidled up. "Or even a tree."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because I've just climbed up this badger rock a way and had a look around. The one thing that stands out like a landmark is a tree. If s sort of directly in line with the path between these two rocks, but we can't see it from where we stand down here."

Jess Squirrel raced up the rock face of the badger peak like an arrow from a bow.

'If s there, Matthias," she called down. "I can see it. The biggest fir tree in the world. What a sight! If s colossal!"

The early noonday sun beat down on the summit of badger rock. Matthias, Jess and Cheek stood atop the tall edifice, looking down at the tree in the distance. The warrior mouse grasped the rope Jess had rigged. "Come on, lef s get down from here and get moving. I

want to arrive at that tree before the sun goes down. I know exactly what to do and what to

look out for now!"

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Mattimeo's eyes opened slowly. He felt sick and groggy, but above all frightened. Lifting his manacled paws, he rubbed his eyes. The last thing he remembered was being held whilst a hooded figure pressed something against his face. The overpowering sweet sickness of it still hung upon his breath. He had lost count of time. Though it was dark he felt he was in some sort of chamber, and outside it might be night or day; he had no way of knowing.

The creatures around him were groaning, moving restlessly as the effects of the soporific wore off. Then the familiar heavy paw of Auma touched his.

"Mattimeo, is that you? What happened? Where are we?" the badger asked worriedly.

"I don't know. If s too dark in here. Feels like a kind of stone room, like Ambrose Spike's wine cellar at Redwall."

"I don't like it. If s cold, too. Are the rest of us all here?"

The others had awakened, and they dragged themselves over to the sound of Auma's voice. Though their presence was of small comfort, the young mouse could not shake off the dread aura surrounding him. A shrew whimpered in the darkness, then the ja igle of keys outside warned them that some creature was about to enter.

A torch flared and they covered their eyes against the brightness of the light. Shadows danced about the stone walls as the torch-bearer entered. It was a rat in a long purple robe. His eyes glinted dully in the flames from the torch, and when he spoke his voice was flat in tone, but menacing and imperious.

"I am Nadaz, Voice of the Host," he said. "Do not move or dare to talk with me, or you will regret it. Nadaz commands the breath that comes from your mouth. I am the power of life and

death over all of you. There is no light in here, nor is there food and water. You will be left - in this place until I decide that you are fit to use your eyes again, to eat and to drink. Malkariss has spoken!"

The light was extinguished with the slam of the door and the turn of the key.

"Who is Malkariss?" Cynthia asked. Her voice sounded hollow and scared.

Tess grasped her paw in the darkness. "I'm certain we'll find that out soon enough."

Slagar followed Nadaz. They passed through tunnels and rooms, with Vitch trailing nervously behind.

Some of the chambers and corridors they walked along had obviously been built a long time ago by master craftsbeasts; other were crude, hacked and gouged from the earth, with boulders, hard-packed soil and severed tree roots showing in the light of the torches which burnt in wall brackets throughout the strange place.

A long winding passage gave way to a broad rock ledge, and Vitch gazed around in awe. Crystal and mica deposits in the rocks reflected the torchlights of a huge wheel-shaped chandelier, and on the brink of the ledge stood a colossal statue hewn from white limestone. It was the standing figure of a monstrous white polecat, with teeth of crystal and glittering eyes of black jet. Beyond it the ledge dropped away to the depths of the earth. Around the walls winding down to the deeps was a narrow carved stairway which started from the left side

of the ledge, losing itself in the misty green light below.

Nadaz beckoned Slagar and Vitch to stand on a groove in the rock some distance away from the statue. The purple-robed rat moved slowly with bended head until he stood close to the figure.

"Who comes near Malkariss?" a sibilant voice echoed from between the crystal teeth.

Nadaz answered, keeping his head bowed, "It is Nadaz, Voice of the Host, O King of the deep, Lord of the abyss, Defier of the sun! The fox Slagar has returned, bringing many creatures young and strong to work in your realm beneath the earth."

There was a pause, then the voice from the statue spoke again.

"Who is the other one?"

Nadaz went to Slagar, and a whispered conversation took place.

The purple-robed rat returned to his former position. "He is a young rat named Vitch. The fox says that if it pleases you he is a gift, to serve in the ranks of the Host."

"He is not born to the Host, our ways are not known to him." The voke was curt and dismissing. "A rat that comes from the place of woodlands is of no use to us. Chain him with the slaves!"

Two black-robed rats appeared out of the shadows. They seized Vitch and chained him, dragging him off as he screamed at Slagar, "Save me! Don't let them do this to me! I was loyal to you, I served you well. Help me, Slagar!"

The masked fox did not even turn to look at Vitch. He stared at Nadaz and shrugged.

"I thought he might have been useful, being a rat like yourself."

The voice cut short further conversation between Slagar and Nadaz: "Keep the new slaves in darkness without food until I decide they are fit to work. Hunger and lack of light is a sound lesson for creatures that have known freedom in the woodlands. Ask the fox what he wants of me."

Nadaz conferred with Slagar again.

"Malkariss, All-powerful One. Slagar says to remind you of your promise when he brought you the last slave workers: that you give all the land above ground to him, from the gorge to the south boundaries of your realm. He says he will serve your interests faithfully and be your voice above ground."

'Tell the masked one to be patient awhile. Take him down below and show him the work that is being done to complete my underworld kingdom. I will watch him for a time, and when I have made up my mind that his voice above ground would serve me as well as yours does beneath the earth, then I will send for him."

Slagar could hardly wait for Nadaz to walk back to him. He had heard the voice of Malkariss clearly.

"Listen, rat, tell your master that I've kept my side of the bargain. He promised me that land; now you go and tell him I have a right to the territory!"

Nadaz rattled the skull on his sceptre. The masked fox was suddenly surrounded by the black-robed rats with their short stabbing spears held ready. The Voice of the Host confronted Slagar.

"You don't tell me anything, fox. You have no rights here, and never dare to make demands upon Malkariss. Your audience is over. Come with me now. If the Lord of the abyss wants to reward you he will do it in due time. Until then, keep a rein on your tongue."

Feeling far from satisfied, the masked fox was led away down the curving causeway steps by Nadaz and his servants.

The diamond-patterned skullmask moved this way and that as Slagar descended into the green depths. The steps wound down into the earth until they reached the cave bottom, where the green light came from whatever fuel burned in the torches and braziers that dotted the vast and intricate workings. The Sly One was impressed. Dwellings had been

hewn into the rock, streets and avenues stretched before him, some of them looked as if they were part of another building from another time. Groups of young wood-landers, painfully thin and covered in rockdust, worked beneath the whips of their cruel taskmasters, dragging boulders and cutting and dressing stones into square and oblong blocks. Slagar caught a glimpse of some huge unearthly-looking creature that he could not identify.

Nadaz urged him past a band of slaves mixing mortar and cement. Strangely shaped amphitheatres and high arched caverns gave way to a halflit passage, then the party halted in front of a wall. Carved upon it in relief was a weird and curious mural with the figure of Malkariss at its center.

Nadaz turned to him. "This is the limit of our workings. Go now, my blackrobes will take you to your chamber, and there you must wait until Lord Malkariss gives his decision. You are fortunate, fox. Apart from the creatures I command, you are the only one who has set eyes upon the underground world."

As the black-robed rats led Slagar away, he watched Nadaz from the corner of his slitted hood. The purple-robed rat touched the left paw of the carved polecat and the figure swung inwards. As Nadaz went through, Slagar managed to see a shaft of light on the other side before the carving was pushed back into place.

The Sly One made a mental note that this was a secret exit, then in silence he allowed himself to be led back up the causeway steps. Slagar neither liked nor trusted Malkariss and Nadaz, but he was confident that he could outthink them both. One day he would rule all of this land, above and below ground; at present he was content to wait. The delivery of the slaves had gained him entrance to this strange world. Malkariss would probably think he was an efficient servant, and promotion would follow. Slagar would bide his time, he was nobeasfs servant; only one position interested the masked fox. Complete and utter ruler.

The afternoon had begun fading away in pink-tinged sunlight when Matthias and his friends arrived at the tree. It was a giant pine, standing alone.

Orlando stood and stretched to his full height against it. "By the stripes! If s so big it makes me feel like a pebble against a mountain. I'll bet it'd take a lot of otters tail to tip to go round a trunk this size, eh, Cheek?"

The young otter patted the immense girth of the bole. "I'll say it would. Have you ever seen one like this before, Jess?"

The squirrel shook her tail in admiration. "Never. If s a wonderful sight. Pity it stands alone, because you can only climb up it or down, you couldn't leap to another tree. The nearest ones are over there. See? Where Matthias is heading. Hey, Warrior, where are you off to? I thought you wanted to see this tree."

Matthias walked in a straight line with a measured pace, keeping his eyes to the ground.

"If s not the tree I wanted to see, only its shadow."

Basil caught up with him. "What d'you want with a bally shadow, old lad?"

Matthias kept walking deliberately. "Remember the rhyme, 'face the lord who points the way, after noon on summer's day.' Right, the tree is the lord who points the way, and if s gone noon, nearly evening. The shadows are at their longest now. Look at our shadows, they're much longer than we are. So, if the tree is the biggest thing around, it has the longest shadow. I have an idea that where this shadow ends we'll find what we're looking for."

The rest of the searchers rushed to join him. Like creatures in some solemn procession, they walked along with heads bowed, following the path of the giant pine's shadow.

It ended upon a humped rock sticking from the heath a short way from a copse. They gathered around the rock.

"So, here it is."

"Well, what now?"

Matthias banged upon it with his sword hilt. It sounded quite solid, Log-a-Log scratched it, Jess jumped upon it, Orlando tried to push it. In various ways they all tried to make the rock yield up its secret, to no avail. Basil lay flat on his back on top of it, staring up at the rapidly fading day.

"Don't think much of your idea, old chap. Bit of a damp squib, wot? A rock's a rock and thaf s all this one is."

Matthias stubbed his paw against the stone. "Ouch! Listen, I'm convinced that this is it; this is where the poem says that death will open up its grave."

"Just as well we never found it," Cheek gulped.

Basil leapt from the rock. "Aha, but we might yet. I've remembered something too: our old eating game from the border scouts and foot fighters regiment. You see, we used to put out a great plate of food each, all heaped up as high as they'd go. Now, the one that threw the longest shadow won it all. Never took part meself, food's far too serious to gamble with. But on summer's day, that was different. I knew I'd win then, because you get the longest shadows of all on summer's day."

Matthias was becoming impatient. "Summer's day -what summer's day, Basil? Summer is full of days."

"So 'tis," Jabez Stump interrupted, "but to us old woodlanders there's only one summer's day: right in the middle."

Orlando nodded wisely. "Aye, thaf s midsummer's day. My dad told me that."

"Thank you!" Matthias sighed. "But where does all that get us? We don't know how far the shadow would fall on midsummer's day."

"No, we don't," Jess agreed. "However, we could make an educated guess. At least we can see the direction the shadow of the tree is going."

They spread out in a straight line from the end of the pine shadow.

"Of course, the tree might have been even taller at the time the poem was written," Jess called out. "It's very old.

and it could have lost a bit off the top in a storm or something. I wonder where the shadow would have ended?"

It was in the copse! One of Log-a-Log's shrews was first to find it. He held up his paw. "Over here, look!" he shouted excitedly.

A carved stone step screened by bushes was what they had searched for. A tew sweeps of Orlando's axe cleared die surrounding bush, revealing similar steps, a whole flight of them ran

out of sight down into the ground. Matthias traced the less worn edge of the first step carefully with his paw. He looked up at them with a stunned expression on his face.

"I know what this place is!"

Orlando peered at the lettering. "Loamhed. What does it mean?"

Matthias sat upon the step, his paw at the spot where the word ended.

"The rest of it has been worn away. This was Loam-hedge. The mice who founded Redwall with Martin the Warrior came from Loamhedge Abbey. They left because of the great sickness that brought death to many creatures. I can remember when I was a little mouse at my history lessons, Great Abbot Mortimer told me of the founders. Abbess Germaine brought the Brothers and Sisters from a place called Loamhedge Abbey, but where exactly it lay nobeast knew. Now we have found it."

Matthias pushed away the overgrown grass from the side of the step, exposing a standing line of carved mice. The middle one was missing. He drew from his belt the talisman that the old rabbit had given him. It fitted neatly into the center space.

"See, here's the missing one. That fuddled old rabbit knew where old Loamhedge once was, and he gave me this because it was the only thing of value he possessed. Maybe he too was a slave one time and managed to escape from here, who knows. Great Abbot Mortimer used to say that Loamhedge was a building that was nearly as large as Redwall Abbey."

Orlando tapped the step with his axe handle. "What's it doing down there? Are they the cellar steps?"

Jabez Stump looked about the copse. "No, they couldn't be. If this Loamhedge place had been destroyed, the land would have been covered in debris and great buildin' stones. This must have happened at the dancin' of the cliffs."

Orlando scratched his stripes. "I'm completely baffled now. An Abbey called Loamhedge that was here but isn't now, and dancing of the diffs. What's it all about?"

"We Stumps lived in South Mossflower by the cliffs longer than anybeast," Jabez explained. "My old grandpa used to tell me about the days of Josh Stump, his great-great-great-grandpa. They say one day long ago our family lived atop of that cliff, but it started a-shakin' an' tremblin' as if the whole cliffs were dancin'. When it stopped, old Josh Stump he said, 'I won't live atop of no dancin' cliffs no more,' and he took the family to live down in Mossflower Woods. Never a Stump went up 'em again, until I did to search for young Jube."

Recognition dawned upon Matthias. "Of course, it must have been an earthquake long ago. That was what caused the great gorge we crossed. Yes, and those gardens we passed through. No creature ever had gardens and orchards on such bumpy land. The earth had shifted! You see what happened? Loamhedge Abbey must have been swallowed up when the ground moved. These steps would be dormitory stairs or attic steps, and the whole building must have just dropped straight down into its own cellars. Maybe even further, with the great weight of it all."

Ironbeak was determined to confront the ghost. He gave the sentries a night off. Taking Mangiz with him, he stood at the sentry post in the galleries as the last crimson sunburst hit the windows of Redwall Abbey, bathing the floor in a glorious deep rose-colored light. Mangiz watched it through swollen eyelids.

"Mayhap the mouse in armour will not walk until the middle of the night, my General/' he said wearily.

"Yarrak! Mayhap it does not walk at all, fool. Mayhap it does not exist. That is what I have brought you here to prove. Tired eyes of dozy rooks will see frogs fly or atones lay eggs. I am Ironbeak, I know better than to believe such things. So should you."

Mangiz held his counsel, deciding discretion was the better part of valor.

The sparrow who had been watching them from a slit window made his report to Cornflower and Constance.

"Bird say you no come, black crow worm no so sure. Both wait above Great Hallplace, now."

Baby Rollo was having imaginary adventures dressed in the helmet of the Warrior. He waved the sword frantically, singing aloud:

"Kill a bird wivout a word,

Hit a black rook wiv a heavy book.

Bang a crow an' make him go. . . ."

Cornflower relieved him of the wooden sword. "Stop waving that thing about, Rollo. You'll put somebeasf s eye out with it. So, the General is waiting for the ghost to walk again. Let him wait. When it gets dark enough he won't be disappointed. The spirit of Martin the Warrior will roam abroad."

Constance gently polished the burnished breastplate. "You must be careful. He won't be as easy to fool as those two last night. 1 think we need a more intricate plan this time."

Cornflower laughed. "Good, then lef s sit here a good kmg while and think up a clever scheme. Don't forget, it was our turn on supper duty tonight, but we'll be excused because we're working for the Abbey war effort. John Churchmouse and Ambrose Spike will have to cook the supper."

Constance stifled a giggle. "Oh no! John and Ambrose, there'll be war in the kitchen when those two meet over the cooking pots. Right, down to business. Let's get our thinking caps on."

The rooks of General Ironbeak were perched in the dormitory. They listened in awed silence as Grubclaw and Ragwing related their encounter with the Abbey ghost, especially as the two rooks were not above adding bits to make it a good story now that Ironbeak and Mangiz were not there.

"Hakka! It was dark out there last night. I could feel in my feathers that something was going to happen," Ragdaw began.

"Kraak! Me too. It was darker and gloomier than the bottom of a northland well. So Ragwing and I stood sentry with beaks and daws at the ready for any funny business, didn't we, bird?" Grubdaw added.

"Aye, we did that. Then suddenly Grubdaw says to me, 'Ragwing, can you see that shadow down there?'"

"How could you see a shadow if it was pitch-black?" a rook interrupted.

"Well, er, er. It was the moonlight coming in through the windows. Yes, thafs right it was the moonlight, anyhow"

The rook butted in again. "Kaah! What a load of old eggshells. It was dark as a northland well, but with moonlight shining through the windows."

Grubclaw ruffled his feathers airily. "Kragga! Who is telling this, you or us? We know what we saw. But we can keep it to ourselves if you start making fun of us."

TTie other rooks silenced the interrupter.

"We saw a shadow in the moonlight," Ragwing continued. "Well, at first we thought it was a shadow, but when we looked closer it was an earthcrawler."

Grubclaw nodded solemnly. "A ghost mouse, all in armour. It seemed to appear from nowhere. Crook! It was carrying a long sword and it had no face. It moved like a

feather in the breeze. I think it was floating, don't you, Ragwing?"

"Yes, it definitely floated. And another thing, it carried the long sword as if it weighed nothing. It must have had great spirit strength. The cold lights burned from its eyes like fire in ice"

"I thought you said it had no face. How could it have burning eyes?"

"Yaggah! Will you shut your beak and listen? It was, it was, er, the white moonlight shining

on it, yes, it made the face that this ghost didn't have look like two burning eyes. Haak! We saw it, I swear on my egg and nest. Isn't that right, mate?"

"True, true. It seemed to know we were watching it, because it turned to face us. We perched there, ready to attack if the ghost mouse tried anything."

"And did it? Try anything, I mean?"

"Krakkah! Did it! Well, it pointed with this great sharp sword and said; T)eath to all who stay in the redhouse!'"

"Aye, that's the very words it said. But the voice! Kaah! It was like thunder over mountains, I wonder you lot didn't hear it."

"We were sleeping. So, what did you do?"

"Haak! I'll tell you what we did, we shook our daws at it and said; 'You come any closer, ghost, and you'U have us to deal with. Stop there while we go and bring General Ironbeak our Chief,'" Grubwing embroidered.

"Aye, we backed off, ready to give a good fight if it came floating up to the galleries. Ironbeak and Mangiz came out, Mangiz was shaking like a fledgling whose mother has left it," Ragwing added.

"What did Ironbeak do?"

"Kaah, him! He flew about a bit and could not find the ghost, so he said he didn't believe us and flew off to get some sleep."

"So where did the ghost mouse go to?"

"Yakkah! I don't know. To the place where other ghost mice go, I suppose."

"You mean, there might be others?"

"Kagg! I'm not saying anything, but I wouldn't be surprised at all. The big door was open wide, Ironbeak couldn't deny that."

The conversation carried on, getting more horrific with each imagined detail until some of Ironbeak's fighters decided that conquering the redstone house was not such a good idea.

"Did you see Mangiz today? He was badly knocked about."

"Yagg! Do you think the ghosts had something to do with it?"

Ambrose Spike threw a careless pawful of hotroot into the simmering watershrimp soup.

John Churchmouse glared at the hedgehog over the top of-his steamed-up glasses. "Ambrose, the recipe says half a spoon of hotroot. Why didn't you measure it?"

The old hedgehog bustled John to one side. "Don't tell me how to make shrimp and hotroot soup. I learned my recipe from otters. A pawful, thaf s what you need. Lef s see if mat roseleaf and cowslip custard is ready."

"Don't you dare touch my custard, you rough-pawed cellar keeper. If 11 be ruined if you open that oven too soon. Come away."

Ambrose could not get past John to open the oven. He snorted and began furiously kneading nuts into a batch of honeysuckle scones. John rugged his whiskers in despair.

"Honeysuckle scones have a delicate flavour all of their own. Sister Agnes's recipe calls for beechnuts, but you've put acorns and hazelnuts in. Where did those beechnuts I shelled go

to?"

Ambrose wrinkled his snout and kneaded faster. "Oh, those. I ate 'em. There was only a few. I'm very partial to a beechnut now and again."

John clapped a paw to his brow. "You didn't wash your paws. The whole batch will taste of hotroot!"

Ambrose grinned wickedly. "So what? Ginger 'em up a bit. Give them more blackberry wine to drink and they 'won't notice the difference. Come on, quill-pusher, get those onions peeled."

John flung down his oven cloth. "Peel them yourself, barrel-minder!"

Late that night a breeze sprang up. Clouds scudded across the moon, sending shifting patterns over the Abbey floor beneath Ironbeak and Mangiz. The Methuselah and Matthias bells rang briefly, stopping abruptly to leave an eerie silence in their wake.

"How can the bells toll when we have the earth-crawlers trapped in that room below?" Mangiz murmured to Ironbeak.

"Kagga! Hold your beak," Ironbeak silenced him. "I don't know how they rang the bells and I don't care. It might be a diversion to stop us watching here. Keep your eyes on the floor below, over by the big door."

They waited and watched.

So did the rooks from the dormitory, who had sneaked out on to the far corner of the galleries. Curiosity had overcome their General's command to stay in the dormitory. They had to see for themselves.

The main Abbey door creaked on its hinges, slowly opening.

The raven and the crow held their breath as they watched it. A few dried leaves drifted in on the sighing breeze, pale moon patterns swayed on the worn stone floor, and the darkness in shadowy corners seemed to grow deeper.

The tomblike silence was broken by a voice like rolling thunder:

"Death waits in this place for those who stay!"

Mangiz felt the feathers on his back rise as if a cold paw had touched them.

The ghostly phantom appeared. It came in slowly by

the doorway, halted, looked up at Ironbeak and pointed with the sword.

"See, General, there it is, the armoured mouse!" Mangiz exclaimed.

Ironbeak buffeted the crow savagely. "Shuttup, idiot. I'm going to deal with this once and for all!"

The raven went into a short run. He hurled himself over the galleries and sped towards the floor of Great Hall.

The apparition took one pace backward and vanished completely!

There was a cry of horror from the rooks. General Ironbeak skidded to a halt. Landing clumsily in his haste, he bowled over in a bundle of feathers. Swiftly regaining his balance, he dashed outside. It was mere seconds since the ghost had disappeared, but the grounds in front of the Abbey were completely deserted.

Ironbeak whirled about, baffled. He tore at the grass with his talons before rushing back inside. Hither and thither he darted about on the floorstones. Finally he halted, his powerful frame heaving with exertion. Looking upward, he sought something to vent his rage upon. The rooks in the corner of the gallery! They cackled as they dashed to get back to the dormitory, but Ironbeak was swiftly among them, lashing out left and right, tearing with his claws, slamming with strong wings and hitting out with his vicious beak.

"Yaggah, krakkah! Why did you not fly down and catch the thing? You were closer than I was. Get back to your perches, you swamp flies. Go on, out of my sight, you soft-beaked craven! You will forget what you saw here. It was only a trick of the moonlight. If I hear one bird speak of it I will break his wings!"

The rooks fled the scene, with Ironbeak chasing them. Mangiz slipped away quietly from the other end of the galleries, not wanting to face his General's rage. Great Hall lay quiet and still once more.

Behind the half-open door, Constance and Foremole folded the black doth which they had used to make Cornflower vanish. The three Redwallers slid silently from the Great Hall, out into the tunnel and back to Cavern Hole, where supper was set out ready for them.

The Abbot took the sword from Cornflower as she unbuckled the armour. "Well, how did it go?" he asked anxiously.

"Perfect, Father Abbot. I appeared, the birds were terrified, the raven flew at me. It was perfect."

"Ironbeak flew at you? How did you escape?"

"Easily. Constance and Foremole tossed the black doth over me, I dodged round the door and we all hid behind it. Ironbeak searched outside and inside, but he didn't look behind the door."

Foremole wrinkled his nose. "Yurr, these scones tastes loik 'otroot. Burr, gimme watter. There be enuff 'otroot in yon soops to set afire to you'm!"

Ambrose gave him a look of injured dignity. "Try some of the roseleaf and cowslip custard."

The Abbot prodded it gingerly. "Oh, is that what it is? I thought it was a collapsed bird's nest."

Ambrose sniffed and went off to the wine cellar with his snout in the air. "Well, I enjoyed it. You lot don't deserve a good cook!"

Night had fallen over the copse. Matthias and Orlando sat upon the step, putting an edge to axe and sword against the stone. Shrews filled their sting pouches, Basil ate his fill, and Cheek and jess fashioned javelins, hardening their points over the campfire. Daggers, swords and knives were tested, bows made from strong green boughs, arrows tipped and hardened in the fire. It was but a few hours to dawn when all the preparations were completed. They lay down to take a brief rest.

Before they slept Matthias, Jess, Orlando and Jabez stood above the stone step. They held paws foursquare and swore a solemn oath.

"At dawn we will go down those steps. We will not come back up without our young ones, nor will we come up if the fox still lives."

Orlando turned to the five shivering weasel captives and pointed his axe at them.

"Get yourselves ready, because you'll be going down first."

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The fighting rooks of General Ironbeak were badly frightened. At first it had been exciting to perch and talk of the ghost, when none of them really believed there was one. But now they had seen it with their own eyes, a terrifying phantom that uttered dire warnings. Ironbeak himself could not harm it; the tiling had vanished completely in a trice.

All through the night the sentry posts had been deserted while the rooks huddled together in the darkened dormitory, whispering of the awesome event. Grubclaw and Ragwing had been right, so had the wise Mangjz; the great redstone house was a bad place to be. The advent of a golden sunlit morning did little to change their minds.

That task was left to General Ironbeak, and he set about it with gusto. Sunrays flooded through the broken dormitory window, turning the raven leader's black wings an iridescent green, flecked with tinges of blue. He paced up and down with an aggressive rolling gait as he confronted his command.

"Yaggah! You cuckoo-brained bunch, can you not see it is all a trick the earthcrawlers are playing on us?"

The rooks shifted uneasily, inspecting their feathers or staring down at their daws. Some of them looked to

Mangjz, but the crow had distanced himself from the whole thing by perching upon a cupboard with his eyes dosed.

Ironbeak carried on ranting. "Kaah! I flew down to attack this so-called ghost, and did it strike me dead, did it attack me, did it even stay to defend its Abbey? No, it hid away by some silly little trick. It fooled you all, but it did not fool Ironbeak, nor did it scare him. I am the greatest fighter in all the northlands. An earthcrawler mouse with bits of metal does not scare me. I will face it right now, or in the middle of a dark night. Mangiz, is what I say true?"

The seer crow opened one eye. He knew better than to argue with the raven leader.

"The mighty Ironbeak fears no living thing. He speaks true."

Baby Rollo was taking cooking lessons. Brother Dan and Gaffer were teaching him to make breakfast pancakes of chestnut flour and greensap milk, studded with dried damson pieces preserved in honey sugar. The infant bankvole was far more concerned with the tossing of the

pancakes than the mixing of them. Brother Dan was up to his paws in the sticky mixture, and blobs of it dung to his ears and nosetip. Gaffer discovered he had a sweet tooth for preserved damson pieces. The mole sorted through the supply for the choicest bits and promptly ate them.

Winifred the Otter caught all three of them like guilty young ones as she entered the kitchen.
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'What's the hold-up out here? There's a lot of hungry creatures waiting for breakfast out in the Well, swish my tail! What in the good name of bulrushes is going on? Rollo, stop sticking those pancakes to the ceiling, this instant!"

Rollo was in the act of throwing a pancake from the pan at the ceiling. He stopped, and the pancake flopped neatly over his head, covering him to the neck. Another

pancake slowly detached itself from the ceiling and began to fall. Winifred grabbed a plate and ran to catch it.

"Brother Dan, stop playing round with that batter like a hedgehog in mud and help me."

Winifred caught the falling pancake as Brother Dan took a plate in his sticky paws and went after another potential dropper. Gaffer began trying to remove the pancake from baby Rollo's head. The infant had eaten a hole in it to give himself some breathing space. Sensibly, Gaffer began eating from between Rollo's ears.

"Hurr, bain't gonna pull this'n offa you'm, Rollyo. Best scoff away both'n uz 'til it be gone. Hurr hurr!"

Cornflower appeared in the kitchen doorway. She tried to look very forbidding, while at the same time doing her best to stifle the laughter that was bubbling through at the comical scene.

"Shame on all four of you, hahaha, er, hmph! What on earth are you doing, heeheehee, ahem! Gaffer, will you stop trying to eat that infant's head and remove the pancake with some flou-flou-hahahahaoheehee! Flour!"

As she spoke, a pancake dropped from the ceiling squarely onto her nose and hung there like a tabledoth.

The five of them sat down upon the kitchen floor, laughing uproariously, holding their aching sides as tears rolled unchecked down their cheeks.

"Waaaahahahahohohohoheeheehee! If s a good job we hadn't ordered porridge for breakfast."

"Hoohoohurrhurrhurr! Nor soo - soo - hurr, hurr, soup, missus!"

The happy laughter rang spontaneously out. It was a great relief to have a pause of merriment after so much siege and sorrow.

Far out upon the western plain, a great dark red bird crashed to earth among the dandelions and kingcups and lay among the yellow flowers like a red sandstone rock. The great bird's sides heaved and her neck pulsed as she greedily sucked in air. Her eyes dilated and

contracted, fearsome orbs of tawny umber, flecked with turquoise and centered with gleaming black, as she scanned the blue sky above for predators.

One wing tucked neatly across her back, the other hanging limply at her side, she made a flapping run and gained the air. The red bird flew with a painful rolling motion, the injured wing flopping lower than the good one. Flight was becoming too difficult to sustain, so she came to earth again, this time in a rolling heap of feathers as she struck the plain floor, scattering buttercup petals in all directions.

The great bird rested momentarily, her huge curved beak gaping open, tongue hanging to one

side. Doggedly struggling to her legs, she walked for a while, the injured wing trailing limply in the dust, her eyes fixed upon the building in the distance at the woodland edge. It was not so open there. Her beloved mountains were too far away, so she would try to make the building before sunset. There would be places where she could lie and rest, nooks and crannies where she could not be caught out. The open plains made her feel vulnerable; in flight she was a redoubtable hunter and fighter, but crippled like this she could only keep low and hope there were no flocks of other birds abroad that would relish the chance to attack an injured bird on the ground.

Flapping and hopping, scrambling and crawling, the great red bird made her way east towards the b.'Uding which offered refuge.

On the far flung south reaches of the plateau lands, dawn

broke placidly over the copse. Matthias rose and picked

up his sword.

"A good day to settle business, Orlando." The badger shouldered his axe. "We travelled a long

way to see this dawn, my friend. A good day." All around, shrews were girding themselves up for

war; bows, arrows, slings, lances, even dubs were got

ready. As Basil lugged the five weasel prisoners along on

a makeshift lead, they wailed pitifully:

"No, no, please, don't make us go down there!"

"We'll be killed, we won't stand a chance!"

"We have no weapons, we'll be slain!"

Basil tugged the lead sharply. "C'mon, step lively there, you wingeing weasels. You've lived like cowards; try to die like heroes. Hmph! Fat chance o' that, eh, laddie buck? Stop snivellin' and wipe your nose, you villainous vermin."

They broke away from Basil's grasp and flung themselves in front of Matthias, grovelling shamelessly.

"Spare us please, sir, spare us!"

Sir Harry flapped down from an alder.

"There's nothing affects a craven Like the thought of sudden death. The idea he might not see the night Or draw another breath."

Orlando kicked a weasel in the rump as he stepped over the prostrate creatures.

"You know, Matthias, these scum aren't going to be a bit of good down there. They'll probably give the game away with all their sobbing and bawling. Shuttup, you snivelling snotnoses, or I'll finish you here and now!"

The weasels fell silent. Matthias leaned on his sword, stroking his whiskers.

"You've got a good point there, Orlando, but what do we do with them if we don't send them ahead of us on the stairs?"

Orlando hefted his battleaxe. "Let me finish 'em off now, and save a lot of trouble."

The weasels began moaning afresh. "Stop that crying. CXyou hear me, stoppit!" Matthias snorted impatiently. "Right, here's what we'll do, Orlando. I couldn't let you kill them in cold blood, that isn't our way. We'll set them going southward. Sir Harry, would you accompany them on their way to make sure they keep going? Sorry about this, but there probably won't be a lot of space down there for you to fly about, and you'd get into trouble under the ground."

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Sir Harry shrugged.

"As you wish, as you wish, Matthias. We each have a role to be filled. I'll take these weasels south for a bit. But the first one to cry gets killed!"

The owl picked the lead rope up in his beak and flapped off, with the five weasels stumbling and hurrying behind him.

Basil watched them go. "Pity about old Harry. He looked a bit peeved to me. D'you think he's gone off in a huff, Matthias?"

The warrior mouse nodded. "I've no doubt he has. Don't worry, he'll be back. Meanwhile, I'd like a last word with everybeast. Gather round and listen to what I have to say to you."

The small army squatted in the copse, while Matthias stood on the top stair of old Loamhedge and addressed them.

"First, I want to thank you all for your help and for coming this far with me. You have left your homes and territories far behind. Orlando, -Jess, Jabez and myself have good reason to live or die today. You see, we have young ones to rescue. The rest of you, I cannot ask you to sacrifice your lives for our cause; they are not your young ones down there."

Basil Stag Hare stood up. "Beg pardon, old lad, but young Tim and Tess are down there. Whaf d my old chum John Churchmouse and his good lady wife say if I came back empty-pawed without their young uns? Coming with you? I'll say I am, bucko. You try and stop B. S. Hare esquire!"

Cheek stood by the hare. "I'm with Basil. He's a grumpy ol' frump and I like him, so there!"

Basil and Cheek went to stand with Matthias. Log-a-Log drew his short sword.

"Shrews and Guosim are friends of Redwall. I never started a job that I didn't finish. I go with you."

The whole of the Guosim moved as one with Log-a-Log to stand at Matthias's side.

Orlando raised his huge axe. His voice was tight with eagerness as he called: "Come on, Warrior, what are we waiting for?"

Mattimeo and the slaves had been taken from their darkened cell. Nadaz and several black-robed rats led them to the edge of the ledge where the statue stood. They were permitted to look over into the depths.

Through the greenish mist, Mattimeo could make out the thin bedraggled forms of scores of young creatures: squirrels, otters, hedgehogs, mice. They were hauling huge blocks of stone on towropes, and rats stood guard over them with whips and cudgels, urging them with heavy blows to greater efforts. Other young ones were lifting the stone blocks into position with pulleys and tackles, while yet other young woodlanders laid mortar and limestone cement in the gaps that were to receive the stones. Sometimes a young creature would cry out and fall over exhausted, only to be beaten by the rats until he or she got up, or lay permanently still.

Numbed by the horror of it, the new slaves were led before the statue and forced to bow their heads whilst Nadaz spoke to Malkariss.

"I am Nadaz, Voice of the Host. O Ruler of all below earth, these are your new servants. What do you require me to do with them?"

The hairs rose on Mattimeo's neck at the sound of the voice emanating from the crystal-toothed statue's mouth.

"They have looked upon my kingdom. Soon they will have the honour of building it for me," it proclaimed.

From his bowed position, Mattimeo glanced along the line. He saw Vitch chained and held by two rats. The young mouse nudged Tess.

"Look who's there, our little slave-driver being rewarded for his services. I hope they chain me next to him for a while down there."

less stamped her paw hard against the ledge, her eyes blazing. "They can chain me next to who they like, but I'm not building any filthy underground kingdom for a talking statue!"

The young churchmouse's angry tones echoed around the rocky cavern. There was a brief silence, then Malkariss spoke again.

"Take them back and lock them away without light, food or water. They are not ready to serve me yet."

As they were led up the gloomy winding passages, Tess began to weep. "Oh, I'm sorry I spoke out. I've caused you all to be locked in the dark and starved again."

"No, you haven't," Cynthia Bankvole said bravely. "I'd rather starve than be beaten to death like those poor creatures."

Auma seconded her, "Aye, don't worry, Tess. If you hadn't spoken out, I would have."

"Thafs it friends, we stick together. Redwallll!" Mattimeo's voice rang out like the Abbey bells.

He was knocked fiat with the butt of a spear before they were flung back into their darkened prison.

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It was midafternoon, and Redwall lay quiet under the heat haze. Hardly a leaf stirred in the vasmess of Mossflower beyond the north and east walls, and the plains shimmered and danced, making the horizon indistinguishable.

Down below in Cavern Hole depression had set in. It had started when little Rollo and a baby fieldmouse wanted to go out to play. Naturally the Abbot had to forbid any such idea with the birds about, so Ambrose Spike took them to play down in his wine cellar. Cornflower fanned herself with a dockleaf. The heat seemed to have penetrated the stones, even down to Cavern Hole, where it was usually cool.

"Poor Rollo, he did so want to go out to play on the grass. I remember Mattimeo, Tim and Tess used to go out in the orchard. Sam Squirrel would teach them to climb the apple and pear trees, and that sweet chestnut over by the gooseberry patch."

Abbot Mordalfus mopped his brow with his habit sleeve. "Ah yes, he was a scamp, that Sam Squirrel. Mind you, so was I at their age. I used to get sent off to bed for dashing around the top of the outer wall when I was a young one. Ha ha, old Sister Fem used to say it gave her dizzy spells just watching me. Phew! I don't know about

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Rollo, but I could certainly do with a stroll outside in the grounds. If s hot in here."

Mrs. Churdunouse dosed her eyes dreamily. "Mmmm, I'd love to be sitting dabbling my paws in the pond on an afternoon like this."

Foremole tugged his snout obligingly. "Burr, ifn you'm laydeez ud loik to wet you'm paws, oi'll take you'm thro' yon tunnel to pond."

Winifred the Otter sprang up. "What a good idea! Oh, would you please let us go. Father Abbot? We'll be careful, I promise we will. The first sign of a rook and we'll pop into that hole like moles, pardon the expression."

Abbot Mordalfus took his spectacles off. Smiling indulgently, he settled back in his chair.

"Well, if s pretty certain I won't get any rest with you chattering creatures about. Of course you may go, but don't stay out too long and be very careful. I'll stop here and take a nap."

Foremole was first into the tunnel. "Age afore booty. Foller me, gennelbeasts."

The Abbot settled back in his chair with a sigh. A ray of sunlight crossing Great Hall penetrated down the stairs across the barricade top and shone in his eyes. He watched the small golden dust flecks dancing in it, his eyes gradually dosing as he drifted into h;s noontide nap.

Cornflower came wriggling back down the tunnel, followed by her companions. She scurried from the entrance and, not bothering to dust herself down, began shaking the sleepy Abbot by the paw.

"Wake up, wake up, Father Abbot, quickly! They're attacking it, the poor thing. Oh, ifll be killed if we don't do something."

The Abbot blinked and jumped up. "Eh, what? Attacking what poor thing, where?"

Winifred grabbed his other paw. "A big rusty-colored

ft

f bird, much bigger than Ironbeak's lot. If s over by the

pond and the rooks are attacking it. Oh, I'm sure it isn't

an invader. We've got to help it." The Abbot leapt into action.

"Find Constance quickly. Get any available moles and v bring them here."

; A moment later, Constance rushed in from the I kitchens, covered in flour with a bunch of scallions in her f paw. She dimbed into the tunnel, shouting orders: '", "Everybeast stay here except the moles. Send them

after me. I'll deal with this!"

V In front of the pond the great red bird lay. With one final

effort she had flown over the outer Abbey wall, landing I with a thud on the soft gatehouse garden soil. Seeing the ~ water glint in the afternoon sun, she hauled herself ;; painfully over to drink at the pond. The throat of the ˆ great red bird was dry, her tongue parched, spots ; danced before her eyes. Crazily she staggered and I wobbled towards the water. Next instant she was \ harried by three rooks who descended upon her. They pecked and dragged at the great red bird, lashing out ' with their clawing talons. Half unconscious and defenceless, she lay at their mercy. ; Foremole was awaiting Constance's arrival up the

tunnel.

r "O'er thurr, stroipmarm," he said, pointing to the 5 scene of the attack. "They'm akillen yon burd, they gurt \ bullies!"

Constance hurtled from the tunnel and was upon the

;, rooks before they knew what was happening.

' She bulled the first one straight into the pond and

cuffed the next one high into the air with a quick hefty

, paw. The third rook took oft, leaving most of his

tailfeathers between the badger's teeth. The attackers

flew squawking through the broken dormitory window,

terrified to look back lest the big badger was coming after ; them.

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Swiftly Constance began dragging the great red bird to the tunnel. It raised its head feebly and tried to attack the badger. Constance narrowly avoided the fierce curved beak but took several scratches from the powerful talons before she stunned the already half-unconscious bird with a smart tap of her paw between its eyes.

"Sorry, but if s for your own good, you silly great thing. Here, Foremole, which end do you want?"

Foremole scrambled from the tunnel, leaving three of his crew ready to receive the burden.

"You'm leave et f me, marm. Yurr, Jarge, oi'm asendin' burd in 'ead hirst, save reverse feather draggen. Chuck yon rope round they daws. Oi'll tie beak. Gaffer, be you'm ready wi' grease case'n et be too woid in beam."

Ironbeak and Mangiz flew through the dormitory window with several rooks. They landed where the attack had taken place. The General looked particularly bad-tempered after being disturbed at his noontide roost.

"Yakkah! First it is ghost mice, now we have a great disappearing red bird. Where is it, fools?

"It was right there. General. We pecked it and scratched it "

"Yes, yes. And what happened then?"

"The big earthcrawler, the stripedog, it tried to slay us."

"So you turned tail and flew off," Ironbeak said scornfully.

"Chief, there was nothing else we could do. That stripedog is a wild beast!"

"How long ago did this take place?"

"Only a moment back, Ironbeak. We were at the dormitory window when we saw this big rusty-looking bird come over the wall. It must have been ill because it flapped and flopped about like a new eggchick."

"So you attacked it?"

"Oh yes. Chief. We gave it a good clawing and beaking"

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"And you killed it!"

, "Yes, er, no. I mean, we were going to, when the earthcrawler came."

"Where did the stripedog come from?"

"Search me!"

Ironbeak buffeted the insolent rook flat. He ground his talons against its beak and pecked it hard upon its leg.

"Kaah! Out of my sight, nettlehead, I think the sun in this warm land has addled your brains. First you see a great bird, then you are attacked by the stripedog, and mat was only the flick of a feather ago. Now there is no sign of the earthcrawler and the big bird has vanished too. Maybe they are both hiding underwater in that pool. Shall I throw you in so that you can search them out?"

"The stripedog has already done that, by the look of Grubclaw," Mangiz interrupted.

Ironbeak shook his head sadly. "Gaah! You too. You make me sick, all of you. Watch this."

The raven spread his wings and hopped about near the pond cawing aloud, "Earthcrawler! Rustybird! Come out and fight me. It is I, General Ironbeak, terror of the

northlands!" There was no response. The raven turned to Mangiz

and the rooks.

"See? It is the same as the ghost mouse. Get out of my sight, the useless lot of you!"

From the hidden tunnel entrance in the shrubbery by the rushes. Brother Sedge chuckled quietly. "Oh dear, oh dear, whatever next?"

The great red bird was taken into Ambrose Spike's wine cellar. It was cool and spacious there.

John Churchmouse walked around it awestruck. "Whew! That is a large bird. I've never seen one like it before. What sort of bird do you think it is, Mordalfus?"

The Abbot looked up from the deep scratch he was attending to, "I don't know, John. This is a very strange

bird. It is not a woodlander, nor does it live on the plain, or we would have seen it from the Abbey walls. I wonder what brought it here."

Sister May worked at the other side of the bird. She laid herbs and dabbed lotions on wounds, bandaging wherever possible.

"Poor thing, she's taken quite a savage beating."

The bird kicked and tried to raise its head. Sister May leapt up.

"Oh dear. Look out, she's coming round!" she warned.

The huge flecked eyes with their dark irises snapped open.

Constance beckoned the onlookers away. "Sister May, Abbot, would you carry on with your healing? The rest of you go back to Cavern Hole. I don't want this creature to feel surrounded. Cornflower, pass me those scissors, please."

She snipped at the beak and leg fastenings. "We mean you no harm. You are among friends. Lie still," she said gently. "You have been hurt."

The bird groaned and lay back. "Werra diss?" it asked, in a strange accent.

The Abbot recognized the tongue. "She speaks like the mountain hawks and eagles. I'm sure she understands us, though. Hello, I am called Abbot, she is Sister May and she is Constance. This place is Red wall. We will make your hurts better. Who are you?"

Sister May worked on a deep gash in the bird's leg. "This will take a stitch. Be still, please. I want to help you."

The bird lay patiently watching her. It spoke again: "I be still please. Diss bird called Stryk Redkite, comin' from allrock allrock."

The Abbot wiped grease from a neckfeather. "Ah, a great red kite, a mountain bird. I've read of them in our old records, but I've never seen one until now. Most impressive. Well, Stryk Redkite, lie quiet while we try and heal you."

"Stryk need waterdrinks."

"Oh, right. Constance, would you ask Cornflower to bring water for our guest. Tell me, Stryk, is your wing broken?"

Slowly, painfully, the big bird stood. She looked indignantly at the frail old Abbot. "Stryk Redkite mighty flyer!"

Sister May wagged an admonishing paw at the bird. "Stryk Redkite mighty fibber. Look at that wing. It's totally useless, and I'll wager you've been making it worse by trying to fly with it."

The red kite limped sulkily off into a corner and huddled down.

"Rockslip, nestfall, Phweekl Who needs fly? Stay now, here with friends, with Habbot, with Sissismay."

Sister May took the water from Cornflower and held it up to the huge hunting bird.

"Thaf s all very well, but you'd better be on your best behaviour. And my name is Sister May. Say it, Sister. . .

May!" "Sissismay, goodan' very fierce!"

With Matthias and Orlando in the vanguard and Basil Stag Hare acting as scout, the depleted shrew army padded silently down the steps to the Kingdom of Malkariss. At first it was quite dark, with the morning brightness filtering down only a short way, but gradually the steps opened out on to a broad torchlit corridor.

They halted while Basil scouted the lie of the land. As they waited, Matthias took in his surroundings. The well-finished stone now coated with moss had once been an upper-story passage. Tree roots forced their way between the masonry, causing some of the wall to buckle and bend outwards and water dripped from the roof, forming small pools on the well-worn

floor.

Basil was back shortly with some information.

"The blinkin' place is worse than a great rabbit warren, with corridors, caves, passages an' tunnels, all slopin' downward too. As for the enemy, well, if s rats again, old lad. They wear a black robe with a hood and their weapon appears to be a short kind o' spear; not the throwin' kind, you understand, more your good old stabber. They don't seem to carry any other type of weapon. In a place this size there must be a lot of the blighters, I'd guess."

Matthias tried to form a plan in his head as he

discussed the information with his friends. . "We'd best stay together. No sense in splitting the force. Jess, you, Cheek and Jabez guard the rear and watch our backs. Orlando and Log-a-Log, stay in front with me. Guosim, have your javelins, slings and bows ready. If we run into a small bunch, pick them off right away. Don't let them get back to their main force and report that we're down here, or we'll lose the element of surprise. Basil, was there no sign of our young ones?"

"No, 'fraid not. They must be further down this bally maze somewhere. I'll keep my eyes open. Which way d'you suggest, right or left along this passage?"

Orlando placed his axe on the floor and spun it. "Right is as good as any way. Trust to luck."

They stole off, right down the broad torchlit corridor.

Nadaz brought Slagar before the idol on the ledge. The masked fox stood tensely, awaiting the decision of Malkariss. From the depths below, the sounds of young slaves toiling drifted upwards. The Sly One watched the statue of the huge white polecat, wondering what sort of creature lived within it. Was it a polecat, or a fox like himself? Slagar liked to think it was a fox. He considered foxes to be the cleverest of animals. The voice issuing from the monolith interrupted his thoughts:

"Nadaz, you will tell the masked one that I have made my decision. He is to be given fourscore rats and left to cany out my commands in the territory above my kingdom. Tell him that he will be watched closely. I have many more blackrobes waiting to carry out my word, more than leaves on an autumn wind. If the fox plays me false, he will be slain, both him and his fourscore fighters. If, on the other paw, he remains loyal to my bidding, by the time the snow falls I will increase his command by ten times and set my slaves to build him a stone fortress above ground, where he can rule all the territory from the cliffs to the south hinterlands. Malkariss has spoken. Go!"

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Slagar quivered with excitement. He had heard every word. His silken mask fluttered in and out as he swelled his narrow chest, revelling in the new-found power he had been given.

At a signal from Nadaz's bone sceptre the fourscore rats emerged from the winding causeway and took up their place behind the new commander. Many thoughts ran through Slagar's fertile mind as he inarched at their head alongside Nadaz, up the winding passages of old Loamhedge toward the lands that awaited him in the morning sunlight: his territory. Malkariss was no fool, he thought. The fourscore die with me if I prove false, so he was providing himself with extra insurance. The rr.ts in my command will be watching me closely, and no doubt Malkariss has issued them with secret orders to slay me if I try to cross him. I will show him who the Sly One really is. After I am commander of a great horde with my own fortress, I will make Malkariss wish he had never met Slagar. I will trap him down inside his own underground kingdom, and within a season he will either be dead or eating from my paw. As for this one, Nadaz, he is only a servant to the statue. Slagar serves no statue; the Sly One serves only his own ideas.

Slagar's plans had made no provision for what came next. Hounding the bend in a passage, he found himself face to face with Orlando!

The warrior badger gave a roar and swung his axe, but nobeast was quicker than the masked fox in an emergency. He ducked swiftly back into the ranks of his rats, pushing the nearest two in the path of the swirling axehead. Matthias deflected a spear with his sword. Crouching low, he fought his way into the ranks, sword flashing as he went after his enemy. Log-a-Log yelled and the Guosim hurled a rain of stones and arrows at the rate. Nadaz fell flat, then crawled back against the side of the wall. Springing up, he grabbed a torch from its sconce and flung it among the attackers as he yelled, "Retreat! Back to the ledge!"

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Amid the milling confusion, the clang of Orlando's axe rang against the stone walls as he

scythed madly at the rats who were trying to turn and run. Matthias had fought his way among the rats but lost sight of Slagar. Turning, he faced the rats who were trying to push past him. Blocking, sweeping and hacking, he battled away until he met Orlando coming from the opposite direction. Log-a-Log passed them both at the head of the Guosim.

"After them!"

They stumbled over the bodies of fallen foes. The passage was dark because Nadaz was taking the torches from their holders as he went. Stumbling and banging against the walls, the woodlanders dashed wildly through the inky blackness, guided by the sounds of the retreating rats ahead of them. Light showed from the back of the column and they made way for Cheek, who had thoughtfully retrieved the torch thrown by Nadaz and swung it back into blazing life. Now that they could see where they were going, the attackers ran pell-mell downwards, through winding passages and deserted halls, heedlessly past a heavily locked timber door.

Mattimeo sat up in the darkness. "Listen, whafs that?

Something's going on out there!" he said excitedly. They crowded round the door, banging and shouting. "In here, in here! Help us, we're Redwallers!" But they were shouting to an empty corridor. The

sounds of the chase died away into the distance.

The hunted rats broke out on to the ledge, with Slagar and Nadaz in the lead. Ignoring ceremony, the purple-robed rat shouted towards the idol, "Enemies - a badger and a mouse with a band of woodlanders. They are right behind us!"

The voice from the idol rang out:

"This is your doing, fox. You were followed here. I will deal with you later. Nadaz, tell your fighters to surround

this statue. Sound the alarm, throw the whole weight of my host against these impudent intruders!"

The rats formed themselves in a cordon around the idol, spears pointing outwards. Nadaz dashed to the far side of the ledge and began pounding on a deep circular drum to sound the alarm. Slagar did not wait for the attackers to arrive, he slunk off quickly down the winding causeway stairs, pointing to the black-robed rats who charged past him on their way up.

"Hurry to the ledge, everybeast. Malkariss wants you!" he told them.

"Redwall! Mossflower! Logalogalogalog!"

The woodlanders came roaring out of the passage on to the ledge. Log-a-Log and the Guosim charged thr rats defending the statue, but they were quickly repulsed by the fanatical dedication of the fighters with their stabbing spears.

More rats were already on the platform of the ledge. Matthias gasped with shock. A countless horde was pounding its way up the stairs of the causeway. He had not realized the numbers were so vast. Like seething black ants, they swarmed up from the misty green depths. Without thinking, he threw himself at the foremost group. Orlando and Jess ran to help him, the squirrel armed with a short shrew sword.

"Drive them back, we've got to stop them getting onto this ledge!" Matthias shouted.

A spear thrust nipped Orlando's muzzle and blood sprang to his nosetip.

"Eeeeeuuulaliaaaaa!"

The maddened badger went in like a battering ram. Rats who tried to back out of his way were driven over the edge of the ledge and plunged screaming into the green misted depths. Matthias was filled with battle rage. He tried hard to keep a level head, using all the time-honored skills of the true warrior swordsmouse. Sweep, slice, deave, thrust; he worked like a machine, relentlessly battling great odds. Jess was different, she

leapt and bounded, stabbing left and right, blood flowing from her tail like a scarlet ribbon. Though the stabbing spears were unwieldy at any great range, they were proving effective at dose quarters. None of the blackrobes spoke or shouted. They formed flying wedges, charging individual attackers, often breaking to surround them in a stabbing ring of spearpoints.

Log-a-Log had been driven back twice. At the second attempt he fell, wounded in the throat by a spear. Basil Stag Hare leapt into the breach.

"Righto, Guosim lads. Form three ranks over here. Front and center now, look lively! Slings and bows only, fire, drop down an' reload. Keep advancin', that's the style. Fire, drop down, reload, but keep movin' to your front. Sharpish now. Good show!"

The rats were forced to break their circle and came round to defend the front of the statue from Basil's strategy. The hare was a veteran at manoeuvres. He gathered a small force of shrews carrying javelins.

"I say, young Cheek, here's your first chance at a command. Take these fellahs to the back of the ledge, work your way round that dirty great statue tiling and come up behind those rodents facin' us. Give 'em plenty of the old one-two, and don't forget, m'lad, duck an' weave!"

Cheek saluted smartly, his fear diminished with the heat of battle. "Righto, Baz old sport!"

Basil watched him go, shaking his head and smiling. Hardnosed young blighter, bit like m'self when I was a nipper, he thought. 'Tire! Now drop down an' reload, shrews. That's the stuff f give the troops!"

The battle raged back and forth as Nadaz pounded the war alarm. The booming drumbeats echoed around the rocks as arrows flew, stingers hurled and spears stabbed. Matthias looked wildly about amid the melee. His forces were vastly outnumbered and still rats were waiting on the causeway steps in droves. Breaking dear of the fray,

the warrior mouse yelled aloud, "Retreat! Retreat! Take your wounded and get back to the passage we came in by!"

The Guosim carried Log-a-Log as they hacked their way back to the mouth of the passage. Oriando, Jess and Jabez stood side by side with Cheek as Basil fought a fierce rearguard action. Matthias, weaving in and out of them, helped with the wounded.

Finally they gained the passage, the drum stopped pounding and the rats fell back halfway across the ledge, protecting the causeway steps as their comrades swarmed up, spreading across the length and breadth of the rocky plateau. In the midst of it all, Nadaz stood rattling the mouse skull at the top of his sceptre, p gt;inting at the woodlanders as if trying to cast some sort of spell over them.

Orlando cleaned his axe and set about sharpening it against the rock wall.

"Well, we gave them a good fight, even though we were outnumbered," he said consolingly.

The warrior mouse sat with his back to the wall breathing heavily. "Aye, if we had the young ones now we could back up and go above ground. Trouble is, I haven't seen them anywhere."

The badger licked a wounded paw. "Nor have I, or the fox,- for that matter. I'm not leaving here while he still lives, then if I can't find my Auma at least I'll know he won't enslave any more young ones."

Cheek stood at the mouth of the passage, pulling faces at the ranks of blackrobes gathered a short distance away.

"Yah, tatty ratty! Your silly old statue isn't worth a crushed acorn. It takes a horde of you to face real fighters, doesn't it!" he taunted mem.

Basil and Jess were trying to bandage the awful wound in Log-a-Log's neck, which was deep and serious. Basil shook his head.

"Will / listen to that young rip? Shortly we'll all be slaughtered, and there he is calling names like a vole-maid at a tea party. Haha, the little bucko, good for him! I say, old Log-a-tfung, stay still. You'll only make that scratch worse, /know."

The shrew leader pawed at the wet bandage around his neck. He was panting hard.

"If s a bad one, mate, I'm out of it," he said, rasping harshly.

Basil waggled his ears encouragingly. "Poppycock, old lad. We'll have you as good as new shortly."

Log-a-Log pushed himself into a standing position and turned to Matthias. "Where's Flugg? I must see him. Matthias, I've got to go up into the daylight. I don't want to die down here in mis dark place."

Matthias grasped his friend firmly by the paw. "I understand, Log-a-Log. You go up top and rest. You'll be all right. Flugg, will you and some of the others take Log-a-Log up into the daylight? Easy now, mind his neck."

"Matthias, look!" Orlando was standing on a protruding wall rock/ craning his neck. 'They've let a sort of a rope over the side of the ledge and there's a large basket on the end of it. Looks to me as if they're lowering something down. I wonder what it is."

Matthias shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine. Listen, Orlando, pretty soon now they're going to attack. I can feel it. We might hold out for a bit, but we'll end up being overwhelmed. I have an idea that might buy a bit of time for us, then if all fails at least our creatures might make a run for it and escape."

Standing out from the cave entrance, Matthias pointed his sword at Nadaz.

"You there, rat, I challenge you to single combat!" he shouted.

Nadaz continued chanting and shaking his grisly sceptre. The warrior mouse tried again.

"You're afraid! It's all right when you have your horde

with you, but on your own, ha! You're nothing but a coward. Send anybeast out, then. I am Matthias of Redwall, I am a warrior who does not know fear. Are there any among you like me, or are you all spineless scum?"

The black-robed rats turned to look at Nadaz.

"You're not saving my acorns. Warrior," Orlando whispered fiercely. "I stay down here with you until the end. I'll fight their champion!"

Matthias smiled, shaking his head. "Orlando, "ou are the bravest creature I have ever known. No, my friend, they know you could beat any one of them; that's why I offered to fight. There must be quite a few of them who'd fancy their chances against a warrior my size. But if you must stay, then so be it. When I fall, you can guard the passage and buy our friends a bit of extra time to escape."

Orlando placed a heavy paw upon Matthias.

"Champion of Redwall, you may be a mouse but your heart is far bigger than mine. Look out, something's happening over there."

Nadaz was now pointing his sceptre at the causeway. The rats on the steps made way, and they seemed to shrink back against the rock walls in fear. Matthias gripped his sword hilt tighter and his breath caught in his chest.

It was a huge rodent, somewhere between a ferret and a stoat. The beast looked like a primeval throwback; it had no ears and practically no neck. The hulking head perched squat upon its heavy shoulders leered evilly through curved and stained teeth. Sinew and muscle stood out like great cords all over its body, and heavy spiked iron bands ringed its paws and waist. It carried a stabbing spear of fearsome size and a weighted net.

Nadaz made an evil, sniggering noise.

"Matthias of Redwall who fears nobeast, this is your challenger. Wearet, the slavemaster!"

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Sister May and Cornflower had tried to feed Stryk with Abbey fare, but the red kite was no vegetarian, so they finally compromised by giving the great hunting bird a net of watershrimp. Stryk had taken to the comer of the wine cellar, and she settled down to sleep on a pile of moss and sacking.

"Stay out of Mr. Spike's wine cellar, little one," Sister May warned baby Rollo. "Never go down there alone. We can't take chances with a bird like that one."

"Huh, hope it doesn't get a taste for October ale or elderberry wine, great hulkin' thing like that'd empty my cellar," Ambrose Spike grumbled into an apple and blackberry pie wedge.

The Abbot looked over the top of his spectacles. "No quicker than the average cellar-keeper could empty a larder. You're right, Sister May, Stryk is a fine big bird, but she is not used to our ways. Pity about her wing. She's very proud. Did you see the way she got huffy when I remarked that it was broken? I'd like to take a look at it sometime."

Cornflower stopped Rollo roaming in the direction of the wine cellar and sat the mischievous infant on her lap.

"Poor thing," Sister May said sympathetically. "Apparently she buUt her nest on a piece of branch sticking out

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from the mountain. Then one night the branch rotted and the nest fell. She struck her wing awkwardly on a jagged rock and broke it. Stryk said that she lay in the ruined nest for many days, unable to move. She had no mate to defend her and she was attacked by other birds. Finally she forced herself to fly. Bit by bit she made her way across the western plain, looking for somewhere to shelter, and that was when she saw our Abbey."

Constance came in mopping her brow. "Still hot out there. Where's the big bird? Asleep? What a sizr! I'll bet she could almost lift me. D*you think she'll ever fly again, Abbot?"

"I don't know, Constance. Maybe if we could look at her wing we'd be able to tell. However, big red kites aren't our present worry, it's ravens, crows and rooks I'm concerned with. Cornflower, you must stop this masquerade as Martin the Warrior. I know it annoys Ironbeak, but it isn't getting us anywhere. There's another reason also. That raven is no fool, and sooner or later he'll be a bit quicker than us and he'll catch you. There's too much risk involved, you'll have to give it up."

Cornflower became indignant. "But Father Abbot, when I get dressed up as the ghost I know it upsets Ironbeak, and thaf s why I must continue. It has also started to demoralize his rooks. They're scared, and the crow - wotsisname, Mangiz - he's frightened of me too, I can tell. That crow is a very superstitious bird and the others take notice of him. Let me do it just one more time tonight. Please!"

Mordalfus polished his glasses. "Cornflower, you're a bigger mischief-maker than your son and a fighter as brave as your husband. Make tonight the last time that you haunt our Abbey."

Baby Rollo had dozed off, and Cornflower placed the sleeping infant in the Abbot's lap.

"I will, thank you. Father Abbot. Sister May, come on, we have work to do if the ghost is to walk again tonight. Come on, Constance, we need you for the voice of Martin."

The Abbot stroked Rollo's head. "And I'm left holding the baby, as usual!"

Ironbeak sat at the broken dormitory window and related his troubles to Mangiz.

"Warrior mouse ghosts, big red birds; what next, my seer? The earthcrawlers are down in that Cavern place where we cannot get at them. I have conquered nearly all this great redstone house from the roof down and I cannot let it slip away from me. If I were forced to leave here, we would have to go back to the northlands. They are cold and hard, Mangiz, and it is all fight and no food. We are getting older and could not face many more winters in the north. Tell me, Mangiz, have your visions come back? Are you seeing anything in the eye of your mind again?"

"My General, you were right," Mangiz said readih/, glad that he was back in favor. "I see the ghost mouse was only a trick of the earthcrawlers to frighten us from here. As for the great rustybird, kachah! It was only the imagination of scared rooks. The heatwaves shimmer and dance in this country, and you could see more strange things than on a dark night in the northlands."

Ironbeak was heartened. "Well spoken, Mangiz, my strong right wing. What else do you see? Are the omens good for your General?"

"The omens are good. It all becomes clear as water now. Ironbeak, you and I will live a good and easy life in this redstone house, the food will be plenty and the seasons good, winter's cold will not harm us in this place surrounded by tall woodland. When the earthcrawlers get tired of playing their silly little games, we will catch them all out in the open, and that day they will be slain. Then there will be none left to oppose us. This I see truly, my General."

Ironbeak stood and stretched his wings, and Mangiz ducked to avoid being knocked out of the window.

"Kachakka! This is good, Mangiz. I feel good in my

feathers too. I think I will fly up and perch awhile on the roof of my big redstone house. Tell the rooks to rest well, and sleep yourself. You look tired and hot."

Ironbeak launched himself from the sill and spiralled up to the Abbey roof.

Mangiz blew a great sigh of relief and settled down to nap in the hot sun. It was the first time he had lied to Ironbeak about his visions. They were still clouded by the warrior mouse, but the crow was not going to tell Ironbeak that. What the General did not knew for the moment would not harm him, and compliments were better received than kicks.

When night fell over Redwall and the Mossflower country. Cornflower began buckling on her armour. However, Sister May had a better idea, so Cornflower unbuckled it and listened. Constance covered her mouth and shook with suppressed laughter when the ruse was outlined to her.

"Oh yes, lefs do it. I wouldn't miss this for a midsummer feast!"

The rooks perched in the dormitory, half dozing, half awake, none fully asleep since the General had issued the order for them to have the rest of the day off. Most of them had slept all afternoon, and they found it difficult trying to sleep in the night also. It was hot and airless for birds who had lived their lives in the cold northlands. A full moon beamed down through the dormitory window, bathing the entire room in pale bluish white light.

"Leeeeave ooooour Abbeeeeeeeeey!"

"Yaak! What was thatr

"Death is neeeeear!"

The rooks froze on their perches.

"Death waits outside this roooooom!"

A black shadow cast itself across the beds and the floor. There was something at the window.

The rook Ragwing turned his head slowly and fearfully until he could see the window.

Framed by the broken pane, with cold moonlight surrounding it, was the head of the Warrior, the helmet with no face; pale grey mist hovered in place of the Warrior's features. Ragwing and his companions were in a state of panic bordering on hysteria, and the words of the bodiless phantom were like some dread puzzle: "Leave our Abbey." How could they leave the Abbey, knowing that the ghost had said "Death waits outside this room"! There was only the window, and the horrible head was floating about there. Even the bravest rook would not venture out that way. It was more than the terrified birds could stand, so they scrabbled underneath the beds, afraid to look or move.

As they stole back to Cavern Hole, Constance shook the window pole that had supported the ghostly head at Sister May.

"One more giggle out of you, Sister, and I'll have you put on cooking duties with Ambrose Spike!" she said menacingly.

Cornflower held a kerchief to her face, pretending to blow her nose. She was, in fact, biting the material to stop herself roaring with laughter.

Constance waited until they were out of earshot in the tunnel, then she laughed.

"Heeheehee! I took a quick peek through the window, and the rooks were underneath the beds trying to make themselves invisible."

Sister May shook her head in mock sympathy. "If s no wonder. You didn't give them much choice: leave the Abbey, but don't leave the room. Really, Constance, what made you think that one up?"

"I don't know. I suppose I just lost my head. Hahaha!"

Cornflower wiped tears from her eyes, realising that the fun had turned to sorrow and longing for her family.

"My Matthias and Mattimeo would have appreciated a

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joke like that. Dear me, I can't get them out of my mind night or day. Oh Matthias will be able to take care of himself, no matter where he is, but what about my little Mattimeo, I wonder what he's doing right now, I hope he's safe and well fed. I'm sorry my friends, I'm an old wet rag these days, moping about like I don't know what"

Sister May began weeping herself. "There there, we understand, don't you worry, your young one will be all right"

Constance sniffed loudly.

"Of course he will."

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A silence had fallen upon the ledge. Friend and foe alike were hushed as Matthias and the Wearet circled about. The warrior mouse, straight backed, moved lightly on his paws, the great sword of Martin held double-pawed against his right cheek. The Wearet crouched low, spear held pointing at his opponent, the loaded net making swift dragging noises as he cast it in small circles continuously. The eyes of the two fighters were locked as each tried to read the other's thoughts, hoping one false move of a paw would give him the advantage.

Matthias attempted to keep his back to the entrance, where Orlando and his friends waited, but the cunning skill of the Wearet forced him round until he could feel the rat horde at his back. The Wearet snarled viciously and shuffled forwards, jabbing at his foe. Matthias was concentrating on the spearpoint and the swirling net; not until too late did he feel the spear butt of a black-robed rat hit him in the back of his legs. The warrior mouse tell backwards. The Wearet hurled himself forward, spear first, but Matthias twisted to one side, caught the end of the net and gave a sharp tug, adding impetus to his enemy's charge.

There was a bubbling scream as the Wearet stumbled in his lunge, and the rat who had

tripped Matthias with

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the spear butt staggered forward, impaled upon the Wearet's stabbing spear. Matthias goaded his foe sharply across his hindquarters with the needlelike swordpoint. The Wearet foamed and screeched as he shook the fallen rat from his spearpoint, casting the weighted net back over his shoulder. The weights struck Matthias on top of his head. Blackness interspersed with colored stars exploded behind his eyes, and he felt rather than saw the spear jab at his throat as the Wearet attacked on the turn. There was a ringing clang as the Warrior's swordpoint countered the spear blade.

His head clearing, Matthias leapt nimbly forward, clipping the Wearef s slobbering jaw and slicing across his spear paw. Despite the ferocity of the attack, the Wearet kicked Matthias in the stomach and whipped away at his body with the folded net. He drove his opponent back until he was practically at the rock wall of the ledge. Matthias whirled the sword and came forwards, propelling himself forcefully off the rocks.

"Redwaaaaall!"

The fury of the onslaught drove the Wearet back. He took two sharp slashes upon his flanks before clouting Matthias in the face with the flat of his spear blade and throwing the net over the mouse warrior. Matthias knew he was snared. He could not use his sword, and the net weighed heavily upon him as the Wearet stooped to gather the ends and fully entrap him. Seeing a slim chance, Matthias trod on the grounded blade of the spear, causing the Wearet to try to pull the spear free.

It was all the chance Matthias needed. He bulled forward, battering into the Wearet. Shoving hard with head and paws, he sent his foe hurtling back into the ranks of the rats. Matthias dropped his sword and fell flat, keeping his paws tight to his sides. The Wearet stumbled and struggled amid the rats. Holding only one edge of the net, he dragged at it. The net slid from Matthias, who snatched his sword and jumped up,

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charging straight in among the rats, hacking this way and that in an attempt to get at the Wearet.

"Get out of there, watch your back, Matthias!" Orlando roared from the cave mouth.

Matthias dimly heard Orlando. With the spirit of Martin coursing through his veins, he whirled in a tight warrior's circle. Up, down and at middle height, the great sword was everywhere at once in a glittering circle of steel. Rats fought to get out of its way.

Wearet cut through the rats to Matthias's opposite side and regained the open space. As the warrior mouse came spinning out of the horde, he saw the Wearet and carried on his deadly course. Still spinning, his sword sheared into the net, shredding it to a useless mass of cordage as it was swept from his foebeasfs paw. The Wearet snatched a fallen stabbing spear, arming himself doubly. Prodding and thrusting, he locked blades with Matthias. The ring of sword upon spears echoed around the ledge as the pair fought madly, backwards and forwards, hacking and slicing, parrying and striking in a hideous ritual of death.

Mattimeo and his friends had lain miserably in the darkened cell until they lost track of night or day. Several attempts had been made to force the door, each one more futile than the last. Auma's body ached from the number of times she had thrown herself at the heavy unyielding door, and Sam's teeth were numb through trying to gnaw at the timbers. Mattimeo, Tim, Tess, Jube and even Cynthia had tried in one way or another, all resulting in bleeding and splinter-stuck paws. They sat miserably in the darkness. Cynthia began weeping.

"There, there, hush now. We'll get out of here, you'll see," Tess comforted her.

Auma placed her aching back against the wall. "I'd like to think we'll get out of here too, but where would we go?"

"Anywhere!" Mattimeo's voice trembled. "I wouldn't

mind getting out of here just to die fighting those robed rats instead of perishing down here like some insect under the ground. At least it would be better than a life under the whip of a slavekeeper."

"Ssshhhh!"

"Who said that?"

Sam crawled close to Mattimeo. "I did. Listen, can you hear anything?"

"No, can you?"

"I'm not sure, but it sounds like a drum pou.ading far away and the sound of voices."

Cynthia Bankvole sobbed aloud. "I knew it. They're having some sort of feast, and we're going to be dragged out of here and eaten. I'm sure of it!"

"Oh, stop being silly, Cynthia!" Tess snapped at her impatiently. "What a foolish idea. Where are all these drums and voices coming from, Sam? I can't hear a thing."

Auma stood up. "I can. Sam's right, it sounds like pounding and chanting and shouting. Whatever it is, you can wager it's not going to be any party for us. Maybe Cynthia's right."

Tim's voice came out of the gloom. "Really, Auma, not you too. Voices, drums, chanting. I thought you had a bit more sense than frightening others."

"Huh, I can't hear anything, but I agree with Auma. Sometimes if s best to expect the worst. That way you're never disappointed," Jube said philosophically.

"Thanks for cheering us all up, hedgehog," Tess scoffed. "Here we are, locked in a cell below ground and manacled without a hope or a weapon between us, and you're chattering on about us being the dinner at some sort of evil ceremony"

"Hush," Sam interrupted, "I can hear paws coming this way and a dragging sound too!"

Cynthia gave a little scream.

Mattimeo stood up, resolute. "Well, let them come, and we'll make an end of it one way or another. Lef s try

and do what our parents or Martin the Warrior would do in a comer like this: sell our lives dearly. We have manacles, and they can be turned into weapons. Let whoever beast it is come and try to do their worst."

Supported by Flugg and two other shrews, Log-a-Log made his way painfully up the tortuous winding passages towards the surface. The shrew leader groaned and lowered himself slowly down, resting his back against a door.

"Log-a-Log, are you all right?" Flugg asked anxiously.

He nodded wearily. "I must sit here awhile. It's all uphill to the copse. Let me rest and catch my breath."

The shrews sat with him.

"When we get above ground you must leave me," he said, turning to Flugg. "Go back and help our friends. Flugg, you have been my good comrade and brother for many seasons. Listen now. Once you leave me and I am no longer with you, the Guosim must have a new leader. That one is you, Flugg. Forget your name; now you are Log-a-Log of all the Guosim."

Flugg banged the door angrily with his sword hilt. "No! Do not talk like that. You must live!"

Log-a-Log held a paw to his throat wound. "You cannot disobey me. The law and rules of the Guosim say this is the way it must be. If there were a river or a stream here now, I would ride

a log on my last journey. Then you would have no choice. Hear me, I have spoken. What was that?"

Some creature was banging on the door from the other side.

Flugg banged in reply. Placing his mouth near the jamb, he called, "Logalogalogalog!"

There was more thumping in reply, followed by a voice calling, "Redwaaaall! Mossflowenr!"

Log-a-Log struggled to his paws. "I'd know that voice anywhere. If s just tike his father's. If s Matthias's young one. Get that door open, Guosim!"

There was a heavy padlock and hasp on the door, but one of the shrews named Gum produced a small dagger.

"Stand aside. Let me try with this," Gurn told the others.

Luckily it was a lock of simple and ancient design. Gurn's dagger jiggled and twisted a few times, then there was a dick, and he pulled the padlock curve from the hasp ring.

Inside the cell Auma had her ear to the door. She listened carefully.

"Keep quiet. We've given them our challenge, now lef s see what they do."

"Are they shouting flogaloggle or whatever it is?" Jube piped up. "Daft sort of war cry, if you ask me."

"We never asked you, Jube. Be quiet," Mattimeo commanded curtly. "What's happening out there, Auma?"

"1 think they're unlocking the door, Mattimeo."

"Right, this is it. Get your manacles ready and give the best fight you can manage. If we don't meet again, my friends, goodbye."

Auma's voice was hoarse and urgent.

"They've unlocked the door, wait, it must open outwards. ..."

Mattimeo felt for his companion's paws in the darkness.

"Why wait? Lef s rush them."

"Chaaaaarge!"

They hit the door. It flew open wide. Mattimeo flung himself upon the first creature in his path. Tim and Sam leapt on another. Even the dim passage light dazzled their eyes, which were accustomed to nothing but complete darkness. Grappling on the floor, the young mouse heard his name called by a deep gruff voice:

"Mattimeo, ifs me, Log-a-Log!"

Mattimeo had Flugg by the throat. His paws dropped with a clank of manacles as he yelled out. "Stop, they're friends!"

Immediately, the fight halted. Mattimeo and his companions stood in the torchlit passage, rubbing their eyes. Gum shook his head admiringly.

"What a bunch of young warriors. Don't rub your eyes too hard. Let me open those manacles with my dagger."

Cynthia began sobbing again, but this time it was with happiness.

The friends were smiling at each other. Gradually it was dawning on them that they were no longer the prisoners of Malkariss, Slagar, Nadaz or any other evil creature.

Mattimeo's laughter boomed around the passage walls.

"Hahahaha, free. We're free. Ifs my father's friends, the Guosim!"

'Ifs certainly your lucky day, young 'uns, most of your parents are here. There's Matthias, Orlando, Jabez, Jess, even old Basil Stag Hare. We joined forces with them to search for you. They're down on the big ledge fighting the hordes of Malkariss."

Mattimeo could hardly believe his ears. His father, the Champion of Redwall. . . here!

Auma let out a great whoop, Sam leapt high into the air, Jube wrinkled his nose knowingly.

'Told you so, I said we wouldn't get far without my old dad catching us up. Do you remem"

He was seized by Tim and Tess and whirled around, then Cynthia joined in.

"Good old Basil, the Redwallers are here! Hurray!"

Flugg was knocked flat by the whirling dancers, but Mattimeo helped him to his paws. Dusting himself off, the shrew grinned broadly.

"By the fur and the claw, and the law, I'm glad we found you lot, though you've got our Log-a-Log to thank for that. If he hadn't decided to rest here awhile we'd have gone right past you and you'd have rotted in there."

Laughing happily, Mattimeo knelt to shake Log-a-Log by the paw.

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"I knew you'd find us. Oh, I just knew it would happen someday. Thank you, Log-a-Log. Oh, thank y"

The Log-a-Log of all the Guosim was smiling, even though his eyes had dosed for the last time. He had lived long enough to keep his promise to his friends. He had found their young ones.

Matthias was growing tired. The Wearet seemed to have hidden stores of insane energy. The strange beast was wounded in a dozen different places, but his size and mad ferocity seemed to buoy him up. The warrior mouse went into the sword fighter's stance, blade held ready to cut, sweep and thrust, gaining a small respite for breath as the Wearet circled him, looking for an opening. Matthias turned slowly as the Wearet tried to get behind his back.

In the mouth of the tunnel, Orlando stood alongside Basil, watching the gruelling conflict.

"That creature can't get the better of our Warrior, but I think Matthias is looking very tired now. Is that a very deep gash on his brow, d'you mink, Basil?"

"Tchah! A mere scratch, old lad. I've done more damage to a salad with a spoon. Don't let the Champion of Redwall fool you, Orlando, oh dear no. In a moment or two he'll decide ifs time for lunch and he'll settle old thingummybob's hash, you mark my words!"

Basil was proved right. The moment Matthias saw he had the Wearet with his back to the wall, he came in like a hungry wolf. Sparks flew from the rocks as Matthias smashed home a devastating attack. He seemed to be everywhere at once, roaring, slashing and milting. The confident sneer faded from the Wearef s face as he found himself battling for dear life. The mouse warrior fought with the strength of two and the skill of many seasons. The Wearet pushed himself from the rocks with a gigantic effort and lunged savagely forward with both spears. Matthias darted to one side, and his blade crashed down like summer lightning, shearing through

|i/both spear handles in one heroic sweep. The warrior $ mouse turned a half-circle with the momentum, but the lt;- Wearet was swifter than a shadow. He leaped at : Matthias's unprotected back. Passing his paws over ; Matthias's head, he began strangling the warrior mouse ;; with the broken handles of the spears which he had held i onto.

* Choking for breath, Matthias slammed his swordpoint C down into the Wearef s footpaw. Grasping the spear-hafts with both paws, he crouched deep, leaning i forward. The Wearet screamed and shot over Matthias's ; head, landing with a thud at the end of the ledge, ^i Matthias leapt up and hurled himself onto the Wearet. His foe was waiting. The Wearet thrust all paws straight into the air and Matthias felt himself rise. He struck the very brink of the ledge and rolled over into the void with a shout of dismay.

General Ironbeak fluttered about in the sunwarmed shallows of the Abbey pond. He took a deep drink, throwing his head back as the bright droplets sparkled

*i, from his fine dark plumage. Mangiz stood to one side, taking in the scene with disdain. He had often drunk |; water, but bathing in it was out of the question. The t/raven General shook himself and swaggered briskly j about at the water's edge. Today was a day for great I plans. The omens were good and he felt energetic. ffH "Oufcfa/ That was good. Now, my Mangiz, are your

* visions favoring us? Does your mind's eye see clear

* still?"

gt; "Kayah! All is still well, my General, though my visions

; say that haste would be unseemly,"

"Kaah! Unseemly, what kind of old farmhen's talk is ' that? Listen to me, my strong right wing, you just keep

*: your visions happy and Ironbeak will do the planning." "But, General, I told you yesterday, the visions said ^ that" J "Silence. Kraggafc/1 have heard enough. Go and bring

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my magpies to me and all my fighting rooks. I have a plan to put paid to all the nonsense that surrounds this redstone house. A good plan, straightforward, with no trickery or sneaking about like thrushes in a hedgerow. From now on we will fight as we did in the northlands; no creeping around the back, good direct attacking, straight wing-to-beak fighting with no prisoners taken. Now go!"

Mangiz was beset by a dreadful feeling of foreboding, though he knew there was no talking to Iron! eak when he was in conquering mood. The crow withdrew, bowing respectfully.

"General, your wish is my command, I will bring all our birds to you."

Little Sister May looked a simple soul, but that was because deep down she was a very wise schemer. During the night she had laced Stryk Redkite's drinking water with a huge dose of the drug she had concocted for the magpies in the orchard. Stryk was a thirsty bird, and she had drunk deep. Now the great red kite lay soundly under the influence of Sister May's sleeping potion.

Abbot Mordalfus, John Churchmouse, Brother Rufus and Sister May gathered round the unconscious bird, each of them versed in the art of healing as passed down through generations of Redwall Brothers and Sisters.

John Churchmouse donned his spectacles and dusted off a slim volume. "Hmm. Old Methuselah's Index of Bird Ailments and Remedies. What d'you think. Father Abbot?"

The Abbot looked up from a tome he was studying.

"Aye, thafs a good one, John, though there's much to recommend this fine book, Sister Heartwood's Compleat Category. It contains nearly five chapters on birds."

Brother Rufus helped Sister May as she raised Stryk's broken wing. Then she wiped her paws busily upon a clean white apron.

"Oh dear, that is a nasty-looking break. Mr. Spike,

would you roll one of those small firkins over here so we can keep this wing irr the right position?"

Ambrose grumpily complied with the request. "It don't do much for the clearness of beetroot portwine to be messin' an' rollin' it about. Here, I 'ope you're not goin' to feed that great feathered lump on my best beetroot portwine."

"I should say not, Ambrose," John Churchmouse chuckled. "Though we may need a drop or two of it ourselves before we're finished here."

"Then I may's well stay here an' help you," the hedgehog cellar-keeper grunted.

The broken wing was propped up on the barrel top and weighted securely with books. Abbot Mordalfus inspected the wingtip.

"Look, there's a pinion feather missing. Sister May, win you check the bird's tailfeathers and see if there's one the same size as the final outward pinion on the other wing? Ambrose, would you have a look in the kitchen for any good strong fishbones. Oh, and we'll need fine greased twine and some dried onionskins, and have a scout round for that jar of rivermud compound we use on burns. I have great faith in the heating powers of that stuff."

They called their requests after Ambrose as he trundled off:

'Tetch the finest sewing needle that Cornflower has got."

"And don't forget the witch hazel."

"Some almond oil, too."

"Then nip into Cavern Hole and pick up my herbal bag, please."

Ambrose shrugged his spikes moodily. "I don't suppose you'd like me to fetch your lunch, dinner, tea'n'supper too. Huh!"

"Oh, and Ambrose, would you ask Winifred to fetch our lunch, dinner, tea and supper out here? This is going to be a long job!"

Ironbeak left off tugging a worm from the lawn as Mangiz approached. He saw the crow was alone and glared severely at him.

"Yakk! Well?"

"My General, what has happened is none of my doing. If you peck me and claw me you will be doing me a great wrong."

Ironbeak's bright eyes shifted back and forth between the Abbey and the crow.

"1 will peck the tongue from your foolish beal if you do not stop babbling and tell me what is happening."

"Kaah! It is the rooks and the magpie brothers, my General. They have barred themselves within the dormitory room and will not come out."

"Now what has got into those duckbrained idiots?" Ironbeak snorted.

"They say that the head of the ghost mouse appeared to them last night, and it warned them to stay in the dormitory room."

The raven leader struck his powerful beak sideways against a stone. The noise it made surprised Mangiz.

"Kaahagga! Then I must go and talk to them!"

Mangiz followed the General at a respectable distance. He did not tike the way Ironbeak had said the word "talk."

The raven perched in the broken window space of the dormitory room; his seer crow sat upon the grass, listening intently.

"Kaah! So, my fighters, you have been listening to the ghost mouse again. What did it have to say this time?"

Apart from a few muffled caws, there was no dear reply. Ironbeak dug his claws into the woodwork of the window frame.

"Kraal You do not choose to speak to your leader. Then I will come in and speak to you."

He hopped down and vanished inside the dormitory. Mangiz hunched up, closing his eyes as he listened to the awful sounds of birds screeching and beds being upset.

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He couldn't see the feathers which flew out of the dormitory window.

"Yaggah! Who gives the orders, a mouse's head or Ironbeak? I am in command here. Get out! Out, you worthless rabble!"

Rooks and magpies poured out of the window, struggling against each other to get through the enclosed space. Mangiz winced at the savage sounds of his General dealing out fierce punishment. Not for nothing was he known as the most feared fighter in the north-lands.

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The great sword of Redwall disappeared into the green mists of the abyss. Matthias scrabbled furiously as he rolled over the brink of the ledge, his paws grabbing automatically for anything that would check his headlong plunge. It was the rope which the basket had been lowered down on that saved him. He seized it wildly but was unable to grasp it firmly and he began sliding downwards, the rock face of the chasm passing him in a blur. The Wearet leapt up and began immediately hacking at the rope.

Bellowing aloud, Orlando charged at the head of the woodlanders. Rats went down before the great battleaxe like corn to the scythe. With Basil and the others facing outwards, guarding his sides and the rear, the Warrior of the Western Plain fought his way through. Too late. The last strands of the rope twisted and shredded, to snap under the blade of the spear. Matthias was gone.

The Wearet turned to look up. The last thing his eyes beheld was the huge male badger swinging a double-headed axe in his direction. Orlando gave a great howl of rage. Rage against himself for letting Matthias accept such a challenge. Rage at everything in this evil place that had taken his young one from him, and rage fuelling his great fighting spirit so that he wanted to do battle

against anybeast that stood in his way. "I am Orlando of the Axe. Eeeeeulaliaaaaa!" The woodlanders' war cries rang about the underground Kingdom of Malkariss as Basil, Cheek, Jess and Jabez headed a wild charge into the rat horde. Nadaz stamped and screeched like a mad thing, rattling his sceptre as he chanted death threats against the invaders.

Matthias felt the rope go slack, and he plunged like a falling stone into the green curtain of mist. Racing through his mind were the faces of Cornflower and Mattimeo, certain he would never see them again.

Whump!

The warrior mouse landed on something soft and yielding. It was a large woven grass basket, thickly padded inside with moss and purple cloth. The force of the fall stunned him temporarily. He lay on the ground beside the basket, trying to galvanize himself into movement and collect his thoughts, amazed at the fact that he had lived through such a fall.

The lid of the smashed basket moved.

There was a slobbering, snarling noise from within the basket, then it fell to one side as something rolled out.

But the creature on the floor beside the basket bore little resemblance to the high statue on the ledge. This Malkariss was gross! The great white mound of scabrous fur, now broken by the weight that had dropped on it from above, was something out of a bad dream. Short floppy paws with long mottled nails which hung limply reached up to wipe the crusting bleariness from eyes dimmed and half shut with age. The mouth sagged open, revealing blackened stumps of teeth.

Matthias sat up groggily. His senses swam, and he began to doubt whether he was still alive when he saw the broken vision of evil crawling towards him. Surely such a thing never lived above or below ground. When Malkariss spoke, his voice was thin and reedy. Not being projected by the chamber within the statue or echoing

around the rock ledge spaces, it was almost a piteous whine.

"You have looked upon Malkariss. You must die."

Matthias shuddered. The horrible thing had its paw upon his sword, which had fallen dose to the basket. As he was about to lever himself upright, a chunk of rock struck Malkariss upon the back and he arched in pain. Another rock hit the white polecat, striking him on the paw. He released the sword with a whimper. More ,ocks pelted in.

Matthias scrambled away, retrieving his sword as he went. Thin, ravaged creatures, fur welted with lash-marks, their paws manacled, were advancing on Malkariss like a grim army. They hurled rocks at the cringing figure. Dragging slowly forward, pulling slave chains along the ground, they chanted:

"Die, evil one, die!"

"We will bury you with pieces of your own Kingdom!"

Gaunt young hedgehogs, squirrels, mice, moles and otters were picking up big rocks from a pile of debris with both paws. They gathered around the fallen tyrant, heaving the stones onto him with all the force they could muster. Matthias watched in horror as Malkariss was buried beneath a growing mound of rocks. Malkariss could no longer be seen, but still the slaves continued hurling rocks onto the pile.

The Redwall Warrior grabbed a half-starved otter and pulled him to one side.

"Here, hold your chains tight across that rocky slab. Do not be afraid. I am your friend."

The otter did as he was told, hope shining in his dust-necked eyes.

"Strike hard, friend!" he cried to Matthias.

The Warrior's sword whistled downward through the air. With a sharp snap it sheared the links of chain like a billhook chopping grass. Nothing could withstand the great sword of Redwall, whose metal had come from a falling star.

Once he had severed the lead dragchain, Matthias set about cleaving the manacles from slaves. Young creatures wept openly, and some cheered and began to dance, with broken chains dangling from their paws. The mouse warrior was freeing them two at a time as quickly as he could, for sounds of battle raging above had reached his ears. A black-robed rat ran up, brandishing a whip, but before he could reach Matthias, a squirrel felled him with a whirling length of chain.

"Well struck, squirrel," the mouse warrior called out. "I am Matthias of Redwall. What do they call you?"

Despite his scrawny appearance, the squirrel laughed and swung the chain until it whirred around his head.

"Elmtail. I am called Elm tail. I will buy my freedom with this chain that bound me as a slave!"

"Thaf s the way, Elmtail. When I have freed your friends we will do it together, mate!"

The slaves began cheering, and those already liberated swung their chains aloft.

The battle on the ledge was in full flood. Side by side the woodlanders stood in a tight circle within a circle. The outer ring of shrews, with jess and Jabez, was stabbing and thrusting with swords and javelins, all the time moving in a clockwise direction. The inner circle fired over their heads. Urged on by Basil and Cheek, they pelted stones and arrows into the tight-packed horde of rats that surrounded the woodlanders on all sides.

Commanded by Nadaz, the rats fought back with fanatical vigor, and many a good shrew fell to the stabs of their short spears.

Orlando would stand at the center of the circle until he regained his breath, then with a mad roar he would charge out to wreak slaughter upon the rat horde, only coming back into the circle to wipe the gore from his axe and lick wounds.

Whenever Basil saw a particularly vicious attack, he too would go vaulting over into the thick of it, his long

flailing limbs laying rats senseless, to be trampled under the masses of their own horde,

"Yahooooo! Take that, you blighter! Here, old lad, have some of this harespaw pie and lie down for a bit."

Thud!

Another rat would stretch his length on the rocky ledge.

More blackrobes pressing up the winding causeway steps piled in to fight, fired on by Nadaz.

"Kill! Kill! Slay the invaders who dare come to the land of Malkariss."

Jess Squirrel angrily turned a rat's own spear upon him. "Waifll I get my paws on that one in the purple robe. I'll make him sing a different tune!"

Cheek flexed his throwing paw and spoke his mind to a nearby shrew archer.

"There's just too many of 'em. If we lose a creature we're one short, but you can knock ten vermin out and twenty spring up in their place."

The shrew sighted and shot his arrow, nodding with satisfaction at the result.

"Right 'twixt the eyes. They never come back for more after that. Whafs that you say, otter? Oh aye, there's no stoppin' 'em, is there? Still, we've signed for the trip, so we might as well make the best of it, eh!"

Above the din of the battle, Jess caught a ripple over on the far side of the ledge at the tunnel mouth. She fought her way to Basil.

"Over there, look. It seems we've got some kind of reinforcements."

Basil did an extra-high leap, taking great care to kick a rat flat on the head as he went.

"Yahaha! Well, blow me old whiskers, Jess, if s the young uns!. Mattimeo! Over here you, young scalla-wag. Redwallll!"

The cry was taken up in answer across the melee:

"Hooray, we're saved! Basil, you old grubweUer, we're coming! RedwallUll!

Mattimeo and the former captives were battling their way through the throng. Using flailing manacles and spears from fallen rats, they drove across the platform with their cell door in front of them as a shield. Pushing, shoving, thrusting and whipping out left and right with everything available, the young creatures fought their way to be reunited with their friends. Nadaz danced and screamed louder, urging his rat horde to greater efforts. The inevitable victory he had foreseen began to waver as the tide of battle flowed in favor of the brave wood-landers.

The Father Abbot was delivering a stern lecture to Cornflower concerning her ghostly antics.

"I did not approve of this venture from the first, my child. One false move and the General's birds would slay you and Sister May. Constance could be badly hurt too."

Cornflower avoided the stern gaze. "But, Father Abbot, we have got the birds frightened. If the ghost of Martin walks the Abbey by night, we will make the rooks and others lose heart and they will not enjoy living at Redwall. Maybe they will fly off to their northlands and leave us in peace."

The old mouse held up a paw for silence. "We went over this argument once before. At first I thought it might have done some good; perhaps it has. But, Cornflower, you are taking this whole thing too lightly, treating it as a big joke. I feel it in my whiskers, one of you will be badly hurt or captured. The whole charade must stop."

A rebellious gleam shone in Cornflower's eyes. "Matthias would have approved of it. I'll bet he and Basil would have kept it up until those birds were scared out of their feathers."

Mordalfus peered severely over the top of his glasses. "I am glad you mentioned Matthias. Have you thought of my duty to him as Abbot? What if he came marching back out of the

south with our young ones, as I am sure he will

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do one fine day? How do you think I would feel, having to report that whilst he was gone I allowed you to play foolish tricks until you were killed? You see, Cornflower, I have a responsibility as Father Abbot to you, Matthias and all the creatures within our walls. Now will you please do as I say."

Cornflower sighed deeply and bowed. "I will do as you say, Father Abbot," she said reluctantly.

The kindly old mouse rose stiffly. He patted her lead. "Thank you, Cornflower. Now, Constance, will you take all the warrior's armour to the gatehouse and put it back carefully."

Constance gathered the armour and climbed into the runnel.

Ironbeak was stalking the edge of the Abbey pond. The silver glint in the waters told him that there were fish about. He marvelled at the abundance of food the earthcrawlers had within the walls of the redstone place: orchards, gardens, a great storehouse in the area below stairs, even a pond with good water and fish for the taking. Sometime soon it would all belong to him. He looked about in admiration, staring at the strong outer wall that would keep other earthcrawlers out. His quick dark eye caught a movement over by the main gate. The big stripedog had materialized practically out of thin air. It was carrying something. Ironbeak crouched in the reeds and watched intently.

Constance took a quick glance around to check nobeast was observing her. Swiftly she unlocked the gatehouse door and slid inside with the armour. The door closed behind her. Ironbeak could see the key still sticking out of the lock. Seizing his opportunity, he rose and glided silently across to the gatehouse. The deed was accomplished in a trice. The raven leader slammed tile door. Sticking his beak into the handle ring of the heavy iron key, he gave it a swift turn and withdrew it from the lock. There was a scrambling noise from inside.

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then the sound of paws pounding against the solid timbers of the door as the badger called

out, "Cornflower, is that you? Stop playing about and open this door. Come on, I know ifs you!"

Ironbeak soared off jubilantly with the key looped on his beak. Now that the enemy he feared so much was out of the way, there was nobeast strong enough to withstand a sudden attack. Truly Mangiz's visions were becoming reality.

Inside the gatehouse, Constance had her eye to the ' keyhole. She could see nothing. Whoever had locked her in was gone, for it was quiet outside. The badger ran to the window. Redwall Abbey was a long distance from the gatehouse. It stood serene and peaceful across the lawns, beyond the pond. The window was too small for a fully grown badger to break and craw! through, so she began exploring the place. Other small windows in each of the bedrooms proved useless. Constance noted the chimney vent in the cosy hearth, but it was out of the question; a badger of her dimensions would be jammed right away. She tried the door again. It was solid, with florin spikes and iron bands fixed to the stout oak timbers. After exploring every possibility, Constance resigned herself. There was a jug of water and plenty of dried fruits in the cupboard. She sat at the living room window, watching and waiting for help to appear.

"Stryk Redkite wanna fly 'gain. Must fly, Sissimay!"

Sister Mary scrubbed her paws wearily. "No, no, you naughty bird. You must rest until the wing heals. Now be still, or you get no supper." "Don' wan' supper, wanna fly." The Abbot and Brother Rufus sat with John Church-mouse, taking their supper at a barrel top. John rubbed the back of his neck. "Whew, I wish that bird was a sparrow instead of a great red kite. It would have been much easier."

Abbot Mordalfus took a long draught of October ale. "It was difficult, John, but I think it was worthwhile. You did a marvelous job putting those new pinion feathers in place. Did you take all your instructions from Methuselah's book?"

John shrugged modestly. "Not exactly, Father Abbot. I did invent attttle fish glue to reinforce the twine that I tied them with, though I actually did manage to get the feather ends into the cavities of the old ones. They should take and be as good as new by the end of season. What about you, Rufus? How did it go with the break?"

Brother Rufus munched wild-cherry flan. "Mmmff, 'scuse me. We used fishbone and feather

quill to repair it. Everything was a bit messy, but quite straightforward when you have our Abbot to help you."

Sister May dried her paws. "I've used every kind of ointment and healing nostrum I know to help the operation along. Now we must wait."

"Wanna fly. Stryk Redkite flyover mountain like sky-clouds/' the big bird wailed.

John folded his spectacles away. "Huh, now we must wait? Try telling her that."

The great red bird made as if to move. Sister May picked up a wooden ladle.

"Just you dare, m'lady. I'll tan your feathery hide!"

Stryk perched sullenly, her wing still supported by the wine firkin and the books.

"Warra warrior, Sissimay shoulda be Redkite."

"The very idea of it, you feathery baggage!"

Cornflower had great difficulty keeping baby Rollo away from the wine cellar. He was anxious to see the big bird. At the moment she and Mrs. Churchmouse had the infant occupied by the barricade in Cavern Hole, where he and some of his little friends were busy at their self-appointed task of watching for rooks. Rollo crouched down, peering round the edge of the table that lay on its side. After a while he turned to the mousewives, who were busy shelling peas.

"No cooks."

"He's trying to tell us there's no rooks," Cornflower explained to Mrs. Churchmouse.

"Oh, I thought he was referring to Mr. Spike when he said 'no cooks.' He's no cook at all."

"Indeed he isn't. Hotroot pepper in the scones! I could have drunk the Abbey pond dry that night. Though our Rollo might have a point. 1 haven't noticed any birds out there, yesterday or today. They may be up to something. Do you think it's worth telling the Abbot or Constance?"

Mrs. Churchmouse rolled a small garden pea over for Rollo to play with. "No, I shouldn't worry. Ironbeak knows he can't get us out of Cavern Hole. It would make him look bad in front of his birds if he failed in another attempt. I think they're doing the same as us, waiting it out. This weather's too hot to do anything. They're probably idling about in the dormitory, eating and sleeping."

Ironbeak was not sleeping, nor was Mangiz, or any of the rooks.

They were gathered at the edge of the Abbey pond, listening as the raven General outlined his strategy, the final plan to conquer Red wall Abbey. Ironbeak paced up and down in front of his command.

"Yaggah! Listen well, my fighters. I will not say there is no ghost mouse; what I say is that it is a trick, some silly thing the earthcrawlers have thought up. When we conquer them I will make them tell us how they did it, then we will throw their ghost from the very top of this redstone house. Kaah! See if it comes back to haunt us then. In the past I was like you. One time in the northlands when I was standing nightwatch, I was sleepy, my wings drooped and my eyes began to close. Yarrak! I saw a great green eagle, a fearsome bird. Instead of running away I flew to attack it. Kaah! It was only an odd-shaped green bush. Do you see what I mean? Tired eyes, darkness, even sun shadows when you are dozing.

can cause your mind to see strange sights. So let me hear no more of these things. They are like the first sight of lightning to an eggchick."

The rooks were unconvinced, but dared not speak.

"Tonight we will make ready for our final battle," the General continued. "Mangiz sees that the omens are good. I know you are loyal fighters. You have fought under me in the northlands. Now you shall have your reward in this warm country, for we will live together in the redstone house with lots of food, sun and easy times. Here is how we do it. I have not posted guards or sentries for two days now. The weather is hot and the earth-crawlers are resting easy. They have plenty of food and dunk themselves safe in the Cavern Hole place. Kayah! This is good. Let them go on thinking we have forgotten ihem, then they will relax. They have posted no guards at their barricade for two nights now. I have seen this. In the hour before the sun rises at dawn, Quickbill and his brothers will go down the stairs. If all is quiet, they will signal to us. Kraal Silence is the key to my plan. Without the big stripedog we will have them at our mercy."

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The battle beneath the ground raged back and forth. Mattimeo and his friends had joined forces with Orlando and the woodlanders. Heaving masses of rats pressed in from all sides, the double circle continued its deadly function, reinforced by the willing young ones. Jess Squirrel stood alongside her son Sam, but there was tittle time for happy reunions in the midst of a battle. Orlando and Auma lifted the door bodily between them, using it as a large flattener on the black-robed rats. Nadaz kept up his chant, wailing and screaming as he sent in wave after wave of blackrobes. Shaking his eerie bone sceptre, rattling the mouse skull, he pointed to the woodlanders.

"Die, die, you will all die here. Your bones will rot in the kingdom of Malkariss. The Voice of the Host has spoken!"

Basil Stag Hare and Cheek lifted a rat between them. The wildly struggling creature screeched as he was hefted above the heads of the hare and the otter.

"We're goin' to chuck you over to your boss," Basil informed him. 'Tell him f keep the howlin' an' yellin' down. Bad form, /know. Right, me old Cheek. One, two and away he goes!"

The rat flew through the air. Falling short of Nadaz, he landed on the spearpoints of the horde.

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Basil tut-tutted. "Oh bad shot, sir, what've I told you about holdin' your end up, Cheek? Never mind. Try, try again, thaf s the spirit. Grab hold of that smelly chap to your left."

Now Nadaz was standing on the big drum. He pounded it with both paws in a mad dance/ and the noise rolled and boomed, encouraging the rats on the causeway steps to press forward onto the ledge.

Jube Hedgehog and Jabez his father were unas' -ailable. They rolled into one tight ball, hurtling madly about, spiking rats over the brink of the ledge, deflecting spearthrusts with their needled armour casing.

But the rats still came forward.

Tess and Tim Churchmouse formed a trio of flailing chains with Mattimeo, and managed to gasp snatches of conversation as they pounded the rats with the swinging slave-chain manacles.

"Watch your back, Matti!"

"Got him, thanks, Tess. Look out!"

"Good shot, Tim. Are you all right?"

"Phew, my paws are getting tired!"

"Aye, there's no end to them. Look down those steps. They're pouring up four abreast!"

Matthias ran farther up the underground workings, dealing with any guards that were left and freeing slaves as he went. Climbing over piles of rubble and dashing through half-finished chambers, the mouse warrior swung his sword like an avenging pendulum, striking the chains of slavery to smithereens and dealing death to the oppressors. With both paws aching, he

stopped and took stock of his surroundings: a long passage with a blank wall at one end. Through the semidarkness he glimpsed a vast carving on the rock wall. It was a frieze of woodland creatures chained together, dominated by a prominent relief of the statue on the ledge, surrounded by robed rats. Relaxing his guard, he laid aside the sword and studied the carvings. Obviously it marked the boundary of Malkariss's evil kingdom.

Slagar stepped out from behind the mouse warrior. The Cruel One dealt Matthias a swinging blow with the metal weights of his three-monged weapon, and me mouse warrior pitched forward, overwhelmed by the striking bolas. Grinning behind the silken mask, Slagar turned his victim over.

"You did well, mouse.! am saved the tremble of slaying Malkariss. When the horde has overcome your wood-landers, I wifl rule here. But first I must fulfil] my oath of vengeance."

Grabbing Matthias by the throat, the fox reached for the great sword.

"Yaahaa! If s the fox! Kill Slagar!"

Lake a hunting pack, the slaves came through the nibble at me masked fox. He looked wildly about for an escape route, and his eye fell upon the carved mural a few paces away. The silken hood sucked back and forth wUdry as he snatched up his bolas and teapt over the fallen Warrior. Gripping the outstretched left paw of the polecat image, Slagar twisted and pushed in the same way that Nadaz had done the previous day.

The stone polecat swung inwards. Slagar stepped through into the bottom of a deep well shaft with sunlight pouring in from above. He slammed the exit door back into place and mounted the pawholds to the surface, reciting an old woodland verse in a crazy singsong as he climbed:

"A fox who fights and runs away, Lives to fight another day.

It is not over yet, Matthias of Redwall, I will live to take your sword, your son, and your life!"

Wiffing paws helped Matthias up. He shook his head groggjly as the slave army packed in about him.

"Where's Slagar? He was here, wasn't her' Matthias asked uncertainly.

Hmtail gave the Warrior back his sword. "You'll never

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believe this. The fox vanished completely into that carved rock wall. We were never allowed up this end of the workings, so the rats must have made that carving themselves. Anyhow, he's gone. What are your orders? Where to next, Matthias?"

The warrior mouse shook off his dizziness. Waving the sword, he began running back up the tunnel.

"To the ledge. Let us finish this thing. Follow me and shout our battle cry so that my friends will knr w we are coming!"

Like a tidal wave beginning to build out upon the sea, the army grew. Creatures poured out of caves, passages and corridors, running with Matthias towards the causeway steps. They heard his war shout and echoed the wild cry until the caverns of Malkariss's Kingdom rang with their voices.

"RedwaaaaaaaallUl!"

Nobody had really missed Constance. As always, the creatures of Redwail were free to go or come as they pleased, and it was not uncommon for the badger to seek solitude and a place where she could be alone with her thoughts for a day or two. The Abbot was not exactly happy with the situation, for in times of trouble his great badger friend seldom left the Abbey. Mordalfus yawned, settling himself on a makeshift pallet by the tunnel entrance in Cavern Hole. Who could tell what was in a badger's mind? He would probably awake the next morning to find Constance busy cooking breakfast for them all, he thought. He checked that the Redwallers were bedded down safely. Baby Rollo was squeaking in his sleep as he snuggled between Cornflower and Mrs. Church mouse, and a night-light burned dimly in its wall sconce. The old mouse folded his spectacles away into his wide habit sleeve. Closing his eyes gratefully, he composed himself for a restful nighf s sleep.

The fighting birds of General Ironbeak also slumbered peacefully on their dormitory perches through the warm

summer night. Mangiz and the raven leader catnapped on the windowsill, awaiting the hour before dawn.

Inside the gatehouse, Constance had slept fitfully during the early evening. Now she was up and roaming restlessly about. Every aperture she had tried was checked and rechecked. The badger had reached the conclusion she had been locked in by a bird, and that the raven had some plan which he would put into operation quite soon. Picking up a fire iron from the hearth, Constance began working on the hinges of the heavily bracketed door.

As if summoned into wakefulness by some inner alarm, Ironbeak's eyes snapped open wide and he surveyed the sky and the top of the outer ramparts.

It was the hour before dawn.

Rousing Mangiz, he hopped down into the dormitory and began waking his fighters, talking to them in a low voice.

"Kurrah! Now is the time. Brightback, take two rooks and your brothers. Mangiz will show you what must be done. Bring the wood. Akahh! Careful now, do not drop it. The rest of you, follow me."

A medium-sized plank of pine wrapped in sheets was picked up by Mangiz and his helpers. They slid it silently along the floor, taking great care not to let it bump against anything. They moved it slowly down the stairs and out into Great Hall. At a signal from the crow, they latched their claws into the sheets. It was hard work, but after a bit of wingspreading and flapping, the plank rose a short way from the floor. With Mangiz holding it steady at the front, they flew low towards the steps of Cavern Hole.

Brightback and Diptail settled the rear end of the cloth-covered wood securely on the third

step down, and Mangiz and two rooks placed the front end on top of the barricade at the foot of the stairs, so that it formed a

straight walk from the third step to the top of the table that formed the mainstay of the barrier. The crow tested it. Walking the length of the plank quietly, he ducked his head under the arch of Cavern Hole entrance. Ironbeak had worked it out well. A bird could pass into Cavern Hole easily this way.

Mangiz flapped one wing three times from die top of the stairs, and Ironbeak and his rooks materialized out of the shadows to join them. The General's quick brigl t eye sized up ttie muffled plank on the third stair.

"Karrah! You have done well. We will pass inside as softly as a feather on the wind. Keep behind me and wait for my signal."

The Redwallers slept on, oblivious to the feathered head which poked itself into their refuge.

The night-light guttered low as Ironbeak crept in, positioning himself on the inside of the barricade where he could assist his birds. One by one the rooks came through the opening, bobbing their heads as they passed the space between the plank end and the curved entrance arch. Ironbeak silently beckoned them to take up specific places he indicated; the runnel entrance, the two steps at the far side which led to the kitchens with the larders and wine cellar beyond, and the edges of the barricade to prevent it being moved outwards as an avenue of escape.

Next came the magpies. He stationed them at the top of the barricade to stop any earthcrawler climbing out. Mangiz was last to come through. Together he and Ironbeak slowly climbed down until they stood firmly inside the final bastion of Redwall.

Mangiz could not help but admire his General. Truly Ironbeak was a conqueror. Despite false prophecies and fighters scared near witless, he had stayed in command and fulfilled his own visions. The redstone house would fall to his beak and talon.

Constance worked furiously with the bent and battered fire iron. Her hackles stood erect with

an unmentionable dread, and some sixth sense drove her to greater efforts as she battered and bludgeoned at the unyielding hinges. Timber splintered and groaned as she struck the door; sparks flew as metal dashed against metal. The stouthearted creature crashed the fire iron into the door again and again, her paws numbed by the stinging vibrations. She had to break the door down, she had to get back to the Abbey with all speed to save her friends from the unknown danger which threatened.

A heavy talon raked the sleeping Abbot's back. He arched into wakefulness with a grunt of pain.

"Yaggah! Wake up, my little earthcrawlers, this is the day I make you do the dance of death. Ironbeak has captured this great redstone house. Karragaaaah!"

Cavern Hole echoed to the triumphant harshness of the raven General and his fighters, mingled with the confused and terrified cries of shocked creatures.

Tim Churchmouse was wounded in the side by a rat spear. He fell as two of the blackrobes hurled themselves on him. Mattimeo battled his way through with Cynthia Bankvole screaming shrill war cries alongside him, and together they beat off the rats that beset Tim and hauled him upright.

"Tim, you're hurt?" Cynthia asked anxiously.

"Yes. I mean, no. I'm all right. Give me that spear!"

Orlando and Auma stormed through, the big badger practically holding the door as a shield with one paw as he flayed his battleaxe left and right, while Auma was creating havoc with a billet of ashwood she was using as a club.

"Get Tim behind my father. Quick, take that, you robed vermin!" Auma shouted.

Orlando glanced anxiously at the causeway steps. "Here comes another wave. There's more pressing up from below. Listen, they're chanting something!"

Sam Squirrel vaulted across like an acrobat. He leapt to the top of the door as Oriando held it upright.

"Ifs 'Redwall'! They're shouting 'Redwall'! Matti-meo, it's your father with an army of slaves!"

Oriando passed his axe to Auma. Grabbing Mattimeo, he lifted him high above his head.

"Tell me, young 'un, is that your father?"

Mattimeo was weeping and laughing aloud as he roared at the top of his lungs:

"Yes! Yes! RedwalllU! No warrior can swing the sword of Martin like him. Father! Ifs meeeeeee!"

Down below on the causeway stairs, Matthias heard the voice of his son rise clear over the pounding drumbeats and the noise of war. A great wave of shuddering joy swept over him, and he began fighting like a berserker. Rats dissolved in front of him as he battered his way madly up the steps. Nothing could stand in front of the Redwall Champion and his army.

Basil Stag Hare whooped with happiness as he struck out powerfully with his long limbs.

"Hoorah, Cheek old lad. Lef s show these rotters what a fight looks like. Right, you wicked bounders, look out. Here comes the hare for the job!"

Tess Churchmouse and Sam Squirrel flung themselves in like twin windmills of spinning chain.

"This is for the beating and the marching and the lashing and the starving."

Thwack! Swish! Crack! Swoosh!

The woodlanders fought with renewed heart and hope. Black-robed rats went hurling over the ledge, they fell back down the steps, and for the first time they tried to escape by the tunnel entrance. Oriando hurried through and blocked their exit. He stood with his back against the door, wielding his axe.

"Come to me, come to me, rats. Eeeulaliaaaaa!" The shrews fought like little demons under the leader-

ship of Flugg, their new Log-a-Log. Leaping and stabbing, twisting and hacking, they were everywhere at once, shouting the Guosim war cry: "Logalogalogalog!"

Nadaz saw the battle had gone against the creatures of Malkariss. All was lost. The purple-robed rat slipped quietly off the drum. Abandoning his bone sceptre, he weaved between the blackrobes until he was behind the statue of the white polecat. Only Tim Churchmouse saw him enter the statue. He remembered what he had just seen before leaping back into the fray.

Now Matthias and his slave army were near the top of die causeway steps. Behind them they left a trail of slain blackrobes. Others had leapt from the stairs into the void rather than face the creatures they had treated so cruelly, or the hot-eyed warlord who led them.

Basil and Mattimeo fought their way down die causeway until they met Matthias on the stairs. The old hare twirled his ears in the most curious manner.

"What ho. Warrior. I see you've taken steps to help us, wot?"

The light of battle left Matthias's eyes as he gazed upon his long-lost young one. He threw his paws round Mattimeo, hugging him fiercely. Tears sprang to the Warrior's eyes as he pressed his face against his son's ragged habit.

"Matti, you're here, you're alive, by the stones of Redwall!"

Mattimeo dung tightly to his father, sobbing and laughing at the same time.

"I knew you'd find me someday! I knew it!"

Basil nodded back towards the ledge. "Come on, chaps. There's still a battle f be finished. Those blighters don't want to give up. Gang of bally fanatics, if you ask me."

Outside, the small wooded copse lay peaceful. Butter-

flies fluttered about the business of summer, grasshoppers chirrupped and small insects slept on mossy stones, oblivious to the carnage that raged in the chamel house beneath them.

A short distance from the copse, Slagar lay behind a rocky outcrop, the deadly bolas grasped firmly in his paws. Warm rays of golden sun beat down upon his torn and stained cloak, making the silken harlequin pattern tawdry against the emerald green of the grass. The hood fluttered and moved spasmodically as the Cruel One muttered to himself, his dreams of power shattered by the very creatures he had sworn vengeance upon. But Slagar would never admit defeat after all he had been through. His breath rasped harshly as he made insane promises to himself.

"Slagar will win in the end. Am I not the Lord of light and darkness? I never needed Malkariss or Nadaz, or anybeast. If the blackrobes win then I will rule them. If Nadaz lives I will slay him and say it was he who betrayed Malkariss. If the woodlanders are victorious then I will slay Matthias and take the sword. I know now, the sword of Redwall is magic, and whoever holds it is the leader."

The defeated woodlanders were huddled against the walls of Cavern Hole. Ironbeak stared at them and wondered how a ragtailed little bunch of earthcrawlers managed to cause him so much trouble.

Under the fierce eye of the raven General, Cornflower drew baby Rollo close and hugged him.

Mangiz strutted up and down, his voice harsh with power. "Krakkah! Now, earthcrawlers, you will pay for your defiance. I am the voice of the great General Ironbeak, mightiest fighter in all the northlands. He does not wish to speak with scum like you. Think of all the silly little tricks you have played. You could not fight like real warriors. Filthy grease and dirt, drugging our magpies, stupid mouse ghosts. Who did you think you were dealing with?"

"A bunch of puffed-up feather bags!" Ambrose Spike said boldly.

The hedgehog was forced to curl up defensively as he was set upon by vicious rook beaks. Winifred managed to fend them off. She helped Ambrose up, and he shook himself defiantly.

"They couldn't hurt one of the Spikes. I'm all right," he told the otter.

"Where is your great stripedog now?" Mangiz sneered. "She has run away in fright."

Brother Rufus shook his curled up paw at die crow. "What have you done to our Constance, you villain?"

"Silence, mouse! Worry about your own fate. The great stripedog will meet hers in good time, but you, all of you, this day will be your last. You will die in this place!"

Abbot Mordalfus shuffled forward. "Let them go. It was none of their doing. I am Abbot here, and I alone am responsible for defying your leader. Take me."

Ironbeak dashed forward and knocked the Abbot down. "Yagga! I am Ironbeak. I say who lives or dies, earthcrawler!"

Before anybeast could stop her, Sister May leapt at the raven leader. She kicked and bit, tearing plumage from the raven's puffed-out breast.

"You big bully. You leave our Abbot alone!" she shouted.

His dignity lost for a moment, Ironbeak hopped about wildly until he had shaken the mouse sister off. As Sister May lay defenceless on the floor, the enraged raven began attacking her.

"Kraah! Stupid little earthcrawler, you will be the first to die!"

Cornflower and several other creatures were about to run in and help Sister May, when the thunderbolt struck.

A giant red bird came soaring through from the wine cellar into Cavern Hole and struck Ironbeak like a battering ram.

"Kreeeeeeegh! I am Stryk Redkite. You hurt Sissimay, I kiU. Kill!"

Feared fighter as he was, Ironbeak did not stand a chance against the ferocity of the mountain bird. There was a massive flurry of red and black feathers upon the floor of Cavern Hole. Over and over they rolled, with Stryk always coming out uppermost, her great powerful talons and beak tearing and rending.

"Yaak! Help me!" Ironbeak managed to scream -?ut to his fighters.

The barricade fell with an earsplitting crash, and Constance was in the middle of the rooks like a striped whirlwind.

Cornflower and Mrs. Churchmouse managed to grab Rollo and the few little ones, and hurried them into the kitchens. Settling the infants under the kitchen table, they ran to peer round the archway into Cavern Hole and witnessed the liberation of Red wall Abbey.

Stryk Redkite fought Ironbeak across the shattered barricade and up the seven steps into Cavern Hole, where the two birds took to the air.

The raven had no way of escape. He flopped about, bouncing from the walls and windows, relentlessly pursued beak and claw by the red kite. She drove at him with her beak, raked and clawed him with her talons. Ironbeak tried every trick he knew, plunging and dipping. Whichever way he went, the kite was un-shakably on top of him, around columns, over galleries, under roofbeams, glorying savagely in her regained gift of flight.

Ironbeak tried one last desperate attempt at escape. He winged straight up to the trapdoor leading to the place in the eaves, and he had actually set his claws into the ring of the wooden door when the kite struck full force.

Stryk Redkite circled the ceiling of Great Hall as the

lifeless carcass of General Ironbeak plummeted down to hit the stone floor below in a ragged heap of raven feathers. "Kreeeeeegh! Stryk Redkite flies!"

Mangiz tried to flee. He took wing and left the ground, flying for the stairs and the ruined barricade.

Constance was waiting. She stood with one paw swinging strongly upward. As the crow drew level with her, she batted out hard. The seer crow hit the far wall of Cavern Hole like a ripe fruit. Then he slid to the floor, never to rise again.

The remaining sparrows of Queen Warbeak's command took care of a rook and a magpie between them. Winifred flattened two rooks with a big frying pan, and Brother Rurus and Sister May accounted for a rook between them.

Immediately, the fight went out of the remaining rooks and the two surviving magpies. Without their leader and Mangiz the seer, they lost heart. Constance pointed a blunt paw.

"Into that wine cellar, all of you. One squawk or false move while you're down there and we'll do to you exactly what you planned for us. Now get out of my sight double quick, before I change my mind and let the big red bird loose on all of you!"

Shepherded by Winifred and Ambrose, the birds fled hurriedly through the kitchens to the wine cellar.

Ambrose, armed with a soup ladle, threatened them, "Move along there! If one o' you rotten eggspawn so much as looks at my barrels of wine and ale, I'll chop off your tails and pickle the lot of you in a barrel of sourapple vinegar!"

Constance set the big table back in its former place, "No real damage done, except to your gatehouse cottage

door, Cornflower. I'll help you repair it. There! The old place looks nearly as good as new. Father Abbot, Redwall is yours once again. We await your word."

The Abbot glanced up into Great Hall. "Our flrst problem is how to stop Stryk flying about. She's making me dizzy, soaring and wheeling around the Abbey. John, you can make an addendum to the books on birds, concerning the remarkable healing powers of a great red kite's wing. By the fur, that bird looks as if she wants to spend the rest of her life in the air."

John Churchmouse, not renowned for his humor, smiled.

"When I was a young un I could never make a kite that flew properly. Funny how you learn as you get older," he joked.

From the wine cellar, the tiny gruff voice of baby Rollo sang raucously:

"Chop up a rook'n make a soup. Send him to bed wivout any bread, Dip his tail in 'tober ale. An' good ol' magpie pie!"

The sound of happy laughter rang through Redwall Abbey from the wine cellar to the very roofbeams of Great Hall, where the big red bird soared gracefully.

Matthias stood with his paw upon Mattimeo's shoulder and gazed around the hushed ledge. Orlando and Auma were with him, Jess Squirrel and her son Sam, Jabez Stump and his son Jubilation, and Basil and Cheek with Tim, Tess and Cynthia. Log-a-Log Flugg and his remaining shrews stood behind Matthias, while before him there was gathered a motley horde of young woodland creatures.

The surviving blackrobe rats had fled down the causeway steps, back to the green misted caves and tunnels that had been the Kingdom of Malkariss. All along the ledge, down the steps of the causeway and across the floor of the bottom workings, lay the ranks of the slain. In the flickering torchlight, eerie shadows danced around the silent rockface.

Mattimeo took the great sword of Redwall from his father as Matthias stood on a rocky knoll with his paws outstretched.

"You are free!" Matthias proclaimed.

A roaring cheer echoed through the underground.

The warrior mouse nodded approvingly. "All of you who suffered under the cruelty of Malkariss, you who were stolen from your homes to lose many seasons of your young lives chained in dark places, let me tell you

something. The world outside is dressed in the colours of summer. Grass, flowers, trees and rivers, they are yours. If you cannot remember where you came from, if you have nowhere to

go, come with me and my friends to Redwall Abbey in Mossflower country and live in peace there. For two days we have had to fight the powers of evil. Many were slain in the great battle, and you must never forget them, the good creatures who gave their lives to buy freedom for you."

Heads were bowed, and tears were shed, for lost youth and lost friends. Matthias stepped down and nodded to Orlando, who took his place on the knoll. The Warrior of the Western Plain raised his battleaxe as his thunderous voice boomed out:

"Let us go up into the sunlight! But first we will destroy the symbol of wickedness that has plagued this place!"

Orlando and Matthias took their weapons to the base of the great white statue which reared from the ledge to the roof of the immense cavern. Orlando spat upon his paws and grasped the axe handle firmly as he swung it back.

"The purple-robed rat, Nadaz, he's in there!" Tim Churchmouse cried out.

A hissing voice came from between the crystal teeth of

the monolith:

"Fools, you cannot destroy the Kingdom of Malkariss. Now I am not only the Voice, I am King of the void."

Matthias walked round the statue until he found the secret door. It was a tight-blocked entrance, cunningly carved so that it appeared as a mere hairline crack on the

smooth limestone.

Matthias struck it with the flat of his blade.

"Come out, Nadaz, it is over!" he cried.

"Over?" The Voice of the Host laughed scornfully. "No, it is just beginning. Malkariss was old and weak. I am Nadaz, I am strong. You cannot get me. The entrance has a secret seal that only I can unlock from the inside. When you are gone I will get more blackrobes, more slavers, and I will follow you and hunt you down like insects."

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Orlando swung the axe, hacking a chunk from the limestone. "Then go to your kingdom, evil one. Eeeeula-liaaaaaa!"

Woodlanders scattered and began running for the tunnels as pieces of limestone hurtled and flew, shattering against the rocks. Matthias hewed at one side of the statue with his war blade. Orlando pounded at the other side with his battleaxe.

Nadaz screeched and raged inside the head of the great white idol. Steel rang against stone as chunks, splinters, powder and lumps of limestone whizzed in all directions.

The muscles stood out like knotted cords upon the back of Orlando the Axe as he slashed and hacked.

Coated in white dust, Matthias swung the double-edged blade, biting deep into the base of the statue.

Grunting and sweating, the two warriors battered away at the likeness of Malkariss until the limestone began shuddering under the impact. Cracks started to show, running the length of the limestone column which joined the floor of the ledge to the ceiling of the cave. The warriors continued their onslaught, but now dogged-ness had replaced their former reckless spirit. Still they swung with deadly purpose, ignoring the chips and lumps of stone that flew about them like missiles, directing all the force of their blades against the idol, while Nadaz ranted and screamed.

"You cannot escape. I will hound you across the woodlands, through the seasons, by night and day!"

The rafs tirade was blotted out by a deep rumbling that emanated from base to apex of the statue, and the whole ledge began to tremble. Matthias shouldered his sword. Then realization of what was happening took over, and he jerked at the fur of the badger's back.

Oblivious to everything except the destruction of the evil symbol, Orlando the Axe flung his whole frame

against each crashing blow as his weapon bit deeper and deeper into the groaning, splitting stone. Matthias ducked as the double-headed blade swung past him.

"Orlando, stop!" he roared at his companion. "The whole place is collapsing! We must get out!"

With an explosion like a thunderclap, the statue of Malkariss broke off at its base. Matthias and Orlando ran for the tunnel entrance, hearts pounding, ears ringing, as they raced across the quaking ledge. They had caused the earth to dance, just as Jabez Stump's forebears had witnessed long ago.

The untold weight of the idol dropped, tearing a colossal piece of the cave ceiling with it. A widening rift split the entire ledge into two sections as the statue plunged into the depths, and the rock walls shattered. The two warriors dashed up the tunnel with the entire underground collapsing behind them.

Mattimeo sat in the copse, watching the last of the woodland horde climbing out into the sunlight. Creatures danced and laughed, rolling in the grass, embracing the trees and waving at the great golden eye of the sun above. Basil winked at him. "By jingo! Thafs something

worth waitin' to see, wot?"

Tess flung herself down at the young mouse's side.

"Fresh air and freedom, Matti. It tastes better than strawberry wine and new bread!"

The ground beneath their paws started to tremble. They froze, hugging the earth as the whole copse began to shake.

Jube grasped his father's spikes. "What is it, Pa?" he asked worriedly.

Jabez hugged his young one to him. "The earth is dancing, just as the cliffs once did!"

Jess and Sam dashed to the flight of steps that ran down to the underworld.

"Matthias, Orlando. Get out of there!" they called.

The steps shuddered violently. Jess peered into the gloom. "There's somebeast coming. Make way, Sam!"

Uttle Vitch the rat scampered out as if demons were biting his tail. "Yaagh! My whole cell began moving and the door fell off. Help me!"

Mattimeo grabbed him by the neck. "My father and Orlando, did you see them?"

"No, no, I just ran. If s falling in down there. Can't you hear it!"

Basil Stag Hare flung himself upon Auma and dragged her back as she tried to get to the steps.

"Father, my father's in there!" she protested.

A deep rumbling boom exploded from the bowels of the cavem. Trees started to sway crazily and the earth bucked like a tablecloth being shaken free of crumbs.

Mattimeo took hold of Auma's paw, and they lay flat on the ground. "We don't leave here until our fathers are out!" the mouse declared.

Basil buried his face against the trembling ground. "Well spoken, young un. I second that proposal."

There followed a terrific bang.

The entire copse fell, creating a huge valley. From the hole in the ground where the steps started, a whooshing gust of air, white with limestone dust, flew high into the sky like a geyser.

Two round objects shot out like balls from the mouth of a cannon. Matthias landed high in the branches of an elm. Orlando tut the top of a rowan and came crashing to earth in a cloud of twigs and leaves. The axe and the sword stood quivering in the bole of a young beech.

Then the earth stood still.

Basil got slowly to his paws and guffawed. "Haw, haw, haw! Mattimeo, there's a flyin' white mouse up a tree over there. Looks a bit like your dad's ghost, wot?"

Mattimeo could hardly believe his eyes.

Jabez Stump tapped Auma. "Your old pa looks like a lump of white dough ready for the oven, I reckon, missie. Hu-huh-huh!"

Jube patted his spikes to make sure they were all there. "Whew! That big hatchet nearly scalped me!"

Orlando rose, dusting himself off in a dignified manner. "Be careful how you talk of that weapon, young un. If s a battleaxe, not a hatchet."

Jess Squirrel and Sam went haring up the beech trunk.

"Stay where you are. Warrior. We'll get you down, but only if you promise to do no more bird imitations."

Matthias smiled at Sam's impudent remark.

"I promise. Just get me down."

That same joyous day, the remnants of General Iron-beak's force were led out on rope leads to the top of the north battlements.

Ambrose Spike and baby Rollo followed them up the north wall steps to the ramparts, the infant bankvole waddling along comically in a passable impression of the bird's gait.

A light, warm breeze stirred the Abbof s robe as he and Constance lined the prisoners up. The inhabitants of Redwall stood about on the broad wall top, glaring at the subdued line of rooks and the two magpies, who blinked in the strong sunlight, huddling nervously together at the sight of Stryk Redkite as she watched them from the wall threshold above the gatehouse.

"Is that all of them, Ambrose?"

"Aye, 'tis. Father Abbot."

"Good. Mrs. Churchmouse, Cornflower, would you put the collars on them, please?"

The two mice emptied iron collars from a sack. Ambrose Spike had made the collars from iron barrel hoops. They were circular and left open in the middle, and slipped easily around the birds' necks.

Ragwing the rook dipped his head cheekily, and the iron collar slipped off and clanged upon the wattstones.

Winifred replaced the collar and whacked the rook with her rudderlike tail.

"Do as you're told, featherbag, or I'll give you something yourwon't forget in a hurry," the otter warned.

The Abbot folded his paws into his habit sleeves.

"You birds, listen to me! We have not slain you or treated you badly, but this does not mean we are soft. Your leader and his crow are dead; the siege of Redwall is over. I have granted you the gift of life. You will be spared, but you must go back to your northlands and never return here again. This is my decision. I will not slay or enslave you, as your General would have done to us. However, you will take with you a token to remind you of your visit to our Abbey. The collars will allow you to fly, not too high, though. They will also prove an encumbrance. Forget your warlike ways; from now on, survival will be your main object."

The Abbot nodded to Constance.

The mighty female badger took the collar of the first rook between her paws. With a small grunt of exertion she bent it so that the open ends of the iron closed about the bird's neck. The collar was now firmly in place, not too tight, but not loose enough to get off.

From bird to bird she went, bending the iron neck rings into place until the operation was completed. The rooks and the magpies pecked at the collars and cawed angrily.

Sister May lifted her paw high. "Now, you villains, when I drop my paw the bells will ring and you will fly northwards as fast as you can. When the bells have rung three times, my friend Stryk Redkite will be right behind you, and you know what will happen to anybird who tries to stop or fly off in a different direction. So good riddance, birds, I would advise you to fly pretty fast."

Sister May dropped her paw.

Bong.' Boom!

The Methuselah and the Matthias bells tolled out across Mossflower. General Ironbeak's depleted fighters flew off as fast as the burden of the iron neck collars would allow.

Bong! Boom!

The Abbey creatures watched them winging low over

the treetops, flying north across the summer green fastness of the woodlands.

Bong.' Boom!

The great red kite took off from the west wall threshold with the graceful soaring motion of a natural hunter.

"Kreeegah! Stryk Redkite fly, Sissimay. Look!"

"Yes, 1 see you, Stryk. But remember your promise. Let them leave our country peacefully."

When the birds were lost to view. Cornflower and Mrs. Churchmouse took Rollo with them around the walltop to the south edge. The Abbot watched them go.

"Where do you think you're off to?" he asked them.

"Now that the Abbey is safe. Father Abbot, we are going to keep a vigil from the south wall until Matthias comes home with our young ones. With your permission, of course," Cornflower added.

Mordalfus smiled understandingˆ.

"Permission granted. You are excused all other duties. Keep a good watch with stout hearts. I know in my bones that our Warrior will return with the young ones."

Cornflower shaded her eyes with her paw, repeating oˆetly to herself as she gazed south into Mossflower, "Martin, return our loved ones safe to us."

Baby Rollo had not quite got the gist of Cornflower's quiet words. However, he placed a chubby paw to his brow as he chanted with her, "Marto aturnd luv ones safetyus."

The Kingdom of Malkariss was gone. So were the last remnants of old Loamhedge. Sunk deeper beneath the earth, the jumble of stones that had once been planned as an underground realm was blocked forever to the eyes of everybeast, choked and cemented in its deep grave by rocks, shale, soil and roots.

Matthias looked up to the rim of the crater, where trees leaned at odd angles in the sunken copse, and brown and black soil showed through the riven cracks in the grassy carpet. Wearily he sheathed the sword across his shoulders and turned to his followers.

"Follow me to Redwall!"

They were halfway up the steep hill when Vitch made a bolt. He dashed downhill, crossed the depression and began climbing the other side.

Matnmeo started to pursue him, but his father held him back.

"Let him go, son. He has no place among honest woodlanders."

They stood for a moment and watched the small rat scramble over a large boulder half embedded in the hillside. Suddenly Vitch screamed and began scrambling back on to the boulder, holding both paws up pleadingly.

"No, no, please. I never told them anything. I wasn't

going with them. They found me!"

The silken mask and cloak appeared in view. Then there was a whirling sound as the metal-ended bolas hissed through the air.

Vitch died without a sound.

"Slagar!"

Matthias and Orlando rushed down the hillside, unloosing their weapons as they ran.

The crazed fox stood up. He ran halfway to the fallen Vitch, changed his mind at the sight of the oncoming warriors and began scrambling to the top of the hill.

Foam flecked wildly from Orlando's mouth as he swung the axe, pounding uphill as easily as he would over level ground. Spurred on by the sight of his archenemy. Matthias raced alongside the badger, his teeth clenched tightly, brandishing the sword of Red wall, The whole army turned and followed them.

Slagar made it to the top of the hill. He glanced behind, to see the two Warriors halfway up pursuing him. Still looking over his shoulder, the masked fox ran.

But only three paces.

The earth swallowed him up. He fell like a great fluttering moth, down into the one place that had not sunk or collapsed: the old well of Loamhedge Abbey, the secret exit from the Kingdom of Malkariss!

Matthias and Orlando stood with their chests heaving as they gasped in air, staring down at the crumpled mass far below in the deep well. The secret way was no more an avenue of escape, it was merely a deep pit that proved useless except for its final function: the grave of Slagar.

"I swore to slay that silken hooded thief!" Orlando sighed with regret.

Matthias leaned upon his sword. "So did I, friend. This has saved us any argument. Let's get some rocks, at least we can bury him together."

The body of Vitch, stfll with Slagar's bolas wrapped around its skull, was lowered down into the pit. The

former slaves filled in the last of the pit with soil.

Orlando tamped the earth with a hefty paw. "There's an end to him. There are no words you could say over such a creature."

As Matthias nodded agreement, a poetic voice rang out from above:

"A taker of slaves and a thief, I know not what master he served, Cruel Slagar has come to grief, 'twas all that he deserved,"

"Sir Harry!"

The big owl flapped down beside Matthias.

"Yes, ifs old Sir Harry the Muse.

I see you won victory.

So I flew back to bring you the news.

Just guess what happened to me.

I chased those vermin south,

I think they're running yet.

When I heard a great noise from afar.

So I said to myself 'I'll bet

Thaf s my friends doing battle beneath the ground!'

Then I turned on my wings and flew to see

How a mouse could make such a big sound!"

Basil came ambling up. "Oh, hullo, ifs you, the great flyin' poetic feedbag. How are you, old chap? Hungry, I'll wager. Wot?"

Matthias chuckled as he gave Mattimeo his sword to carry. "Come on, son, let's go home!"

53

The Summer of the Golden Plain drew to a glorious finish, and the yellow flowers faded and died. Matthias had not returned to Redwall, but still Cornflower did not give up hope. She even pleaded with the Abbot not to name the season. Though Mordalfus had chosen Autumn of the Early Chestnut, he bowed to Cornflower's wishes. Stryk Redkite had returned to her beloved mountains, and the orchard was beginning to get heavy with the rich harvest of fruit and berries.

Cornflower stood on the south wall and faithfully kept up her vigil with Mrs. Churchmouse and Rollo.

"See, the woodlands are turning brown and russet. Soon the hazelnut and acorn will be ready for gathering. We'll miss Jess and Sam; nobeast gathers the nuts as well as a squirrel," she said sadly.

"Aye, beechnuts too," Mrs. Churchmouse added. "Remember last autumn, when all the young ones went into Mossflower nut-garnering? My Tim and Tess bom had long sticks to knock them down from the low branches."

Cornflower sighed. "My Matti got into trouble over the nut-gathering. He took his father's sword from the gatehouse to rattle the branches with. Oh, I do wish he and Matthias were back, Mrs. Churchmouse."

"If hopes were honey we'd have a cupboardful.

Cornflower. Ah well, we'd best get indoors. If s way past young master Rollo's bedtime. Who's on supper tonight?" Mrs. Churchmouse asked, to change the subject.

"Er, Sister May and Brother Trugg. It should be something nice. Come on, little Rollo, supper and bye-byes."

The infant took Cornflower's paw as they descended the wallsteps.

"A come f morrer on wall?" he wanted to know.

"Yes, Rollo. We'll come to the wall tomorrow, and all the tomorrows after that until my Mattimeo comes back. Do you remember Mattimeo?"

Rollo rubbed a tiny paw into his eyes. He was tired. "A'member 'timeo."

Supper VMS good: redcurrant fritters and honeybread with hot elderberry cordial. The Abbey had been repaired after the bird damage, food was plentiful and the season was mild, yet a gloom hung over the Abbey without the presence of absent loved ones.

Cornflower sat late at table with Constance and the Abbot. Ambrose Spike had gone to his wine cellar, Mrs. Churchmouse and John had carried Rollo off to the dormitory, and all the other Redwallers had gone off to settle down for the night. The only sound was Winifred and Brother Rufus laying the trays out in the kitchen for next morning's baking.

Mordalfus folded up his glasses and yawned. "Still no sign of them yet, Cornflower?"

"No, Father Abbot. But don't you worry, they'll come home soon."

"You have great faith, daughter. That is good. But we must learn in this life that the time comes to be realistic. You must see that they've been gone nearly a season's length now. That is a long time in the span of any creature."

A tear rolled down Cornflower's cheek, and she wiped it away busily.

"Oh dear, my eyes get so watery when I'm tired. Maybe I should get Brother Dan to make me spectacles like yours."

Constance's heart went out to the brave little mouse, and the badger stood up decisively.

"Right, if s quarter moon tomorrow night. If they're not back by the time the moon is full, then I'm going out to look for them!"

The Abbot nodded his approval. "An excellent idea, old friend. I'll send the remaining sparrows with you and whoever you choose to take."

They shook paws across the table. Constance winked cheerily at Cornflower.

"Come on, Cornflower. Off to bed with you, or you'll be too tired to climb those south wall

steps tomorrow."

When Cornflower had gone, Constance shook her head.

"I'm afraid I must agree with you, Mordalfus. A season is a long time, and the longer they're away the less chance they stand of coming back."

"I know, Constance, but I couldn't say that in front of Cornflower. She keeps her hopes up, though she looks so sad these days, and the churchmice too. CXyou really suppose they'll come back?"

Constance toyed with some crumbs on die tabletop. "My heart likes to think so. However, my brain tells me different. At least the hope that we'll be sending a search party out soon should cheer her up. Ah well, come on, young feller, if s past bedtime."

The two friends shuffled off wearily up the steps into Great Hall.

Shortly before dawn, Cornflower turned restlessly on her pallet in the dormitory. She had decided not to sleep in the gatehouse cottage until her family was reunited. Soft voices rang through her head as grey figures stole across her dreams. "Matthias, is that you, are you back?" she called out in her sleep. "No, wait, you're not

Matthias. If s Mattimeo. Oh, my little Matti, how you've grown. Is it really you? Come closer and let me look at you."

The figure loomed closer out of the mists of slumber. It was a warrior mouse, neither Matthias or Mattimeo, but so like them both. The mouse smiled at Cornflower and pointed in the direction of the south wall.

"Martin becomes Matthias becomes Mattimeo, and so it goes. Go now," a voice said.

The dream faded as some creature tugged at Cornflower's paw.

She opened her eyes and sat up, as baby Rollo climbed on the pallet.

"Wanna waterdrink, Rollo firstee," he pleaded.

Cornflower hurriedly threw on a habit over her nightgown. "Come on, little one, we'll take water and bread up on the wall. Lef s have a picnic breakfast. The sun will soon be up."

Rollo skipped beside her happily. "Water'n'breads, pickernick on wall."

The sun rose over Mossflower like a ball of red fire, lighting the treetops, and dispelling the long grey and purple rolls of cloud. The sky was soft pink tinged blue. Birds heralded the day as a light mist rose from the forest.

Cornflower looked out eagerly over the still woodlands. Not a leaf moved or a blade of grass stirred. There was nothing out there. She set Rollo's breakfast out upon the stones. Then, clenching her paws in determination, she waited. Still nothing.

The morning brightened as Redwail Abbey came alive with the sounds of creatures going about their daily chores and pursuits. John Churchmouse sat next to his wife at the breakfast table. He looked up from the maps of Mossflower he was studying.

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"No baby Rollo this morning, dear?"

Mrs. Churchmouse passed the cheese to Ambrose. "No, that's strange. Cornflower's missing too. I wonder where they have got to."

John finished his October ale at a single draught. 'Top of the south wall, of course, where they go with you every day. Come on, I'll take you up there and we'll stand with them for a while."

When they arrived at the south ramparts, Rollo was hurling apple cores over the wall at imaginary rooks.

"Morning, Cornflower. Glad to see you've got a warrior to protect you in case of invasion," John remarked.

"Oh, good morning to you both. Sorry I didn't give you a call, but we decided to come up here early and bring breakfast with us."

John chuckled. "Good job it wasn't porridge, the way that young scamp is chucking stuff about. Here, Rollo, why don't you try throwing a pebble with your little sling. It'll go further."

Rollo tried, but the pebble kept hitting the top of the wall and bouncing back. Half preoccupied with watching the antics of the little one, Cornflower turned away from her vigil. Constance joined them, and as the mice played with the baby bankvole, she looked out across the south reaches, casually at first.

Then Constance froze as if she had been turned to stone. She remained rigid, staring southwards and slightly west.

Cornflower looked up as she retrieved Rollo's stone. "Constance, what is it?"

"Dust!"

"Dust? Where from?"

"Seems to be from beyond that bend in the path, behind the trees. I can't tell yet. Wait a moment. . . .Yes, if s dust all right, and if s coming this way!"

The three mice scrambled to the top of a battlement.

Cornflower jumped up and down, and Constance had to catch her apron strings to keep her from falling.

"Ifs dust! Somebeast is coming up the path, I know ft!" Cornflower shouted.

John Churchmouse quickly donned his glasses. "There must be a great many to send up a dust cloud like that so early on an autumn morning. They'll be round the bend soon. Listen, can you hear voices?"

Constance leaned forward, straining her ears. Faintly she could catch the strains of voices chanting the familiar warriors' cries of Redwall and Mossflower.

Round the bend of the path they came, the paws of the horde raising a cloud of brown dust.

Cornflower could see the leaders as they began to march in double time at the sight of Redwall Abbey.

"Ifs Matthias and Mattimeo, they've returned!" she shouted.

John Churchmouse and his wife yelled aloud, "Look, mere's our Tess and Tim. . . . Hooray!"

Constance leaned out across the battlements. "There's Basil, and Jess and Sam. See, they've got young Cynthia with them!"

"I can see two badgers!"

"There's an owl. Look, an owl!"

"Hedgehogs, shrews, woodlanders! By the fur and daw, there's a great army of woodlanders coming this way!"

'Turn out the Abbey, tell the Father Abbot. Sound the bells!"

Matthias marched shoulder to shoulder with his friends, while the horde packed in behind them gazed up in awe at the red sandstone Abbey which reared above the trees ahead.

Mattimeo began laughing. Tim, Tess and Cynthia pounded him on the back as they shouted and cheered wildly:

"Good old Redwall, tell Ambrose to get the barrels open!"

"Who's that on the walls? If s your mum. Look, there's ours too. Mum, Mum! Uyou think they can hear us?"

The Methuselah and the Matthias bells began pealing and clanging out across the clear morning air.

Bong! Clang! Boom! Bong! Clang! Boom!

Basil halted the army. "Right markers, get fell in. Come on, you sloppy lot, we're coming home like a proper army, not a ragamuffin crowd. Ranks of six, chins in, chests out, shoulders

back. Step lively there, you at the back, catch up. Come on, come on, laddie buck, you're not on a daisy-chain ramble now, /know. Quick march!"

"Never gives up, does he?" Jess muttered to Sam from the side of her mouth. "You watch, he'll be the first to break ranks and charge if anybeast throws a pie over that wall."

The hot morning sunlight shafted down on the brown dust rising between the green and gold leaves of Mossflower as the main doors of the old red sandstone Abbey burst open.

The Abbot walked out at the head of the Abbey dwellers. They lined the path facing Matthias at the head of his army.

There was complete silence as they stood looking at each other.

The warrior mouse unslung his great sword. Stepping forward, he laid it flat in the dust at the paws of Mordalfus.

"Father Abbot, we have come home."

There was a mighty cheer which shook the timbers of the main gate frame, then the ranks broke as every creature dashed forward to greet old friends and meet new ones.

So it was the young ones returned to Redwall.

It took the whole of that day in the Abbof s study for the full story to unfold from both sides.

Matthias, Jess, Basil and Orlando, with Mattimeo, Tim, Tess, Sam, Cynthia and Auma, crowded in alongside Cornflower, Constance and Ambrose Spike.

Food was brought in to them as the young ones related all that had happened from the night of the feast to Malkariss's cells. Matthias, Orlando, Jess and Basil related the hunt for the young ones from the same night up to the death of Slagar.

It was late afternoon before they were done. The Abbot had listened intently to the harrowing narrative. He shook his head sadly.

"In the midst of all our joyous reunion we must never forget fallen friends, particularly Queen Warbeak and Log-a-Log. I will hold services for all our fallen friends at the first sunrise of spring, and they will remain dear to our memories for all the seasons to come."

In the sad silence that followed, Matthias decided to lighten the mood of the proceedings a little. He slapped his paw down on the table.

"Well then, Mordalfus you old twig, I suppose you've been sitting here twiddling your paws while we've been away. Tell me, how did you manage to keep busy?"

The Abbot chuckled. "Oh, we managed, I suppose. However, I'll let Cornflower tell you about that."

Cornflower took her paw from around Mattimeo's shoulder for the first time that day. She stood up and grinned mischievously.

"Hmmm, it was as dull as ditchwater without our warriors and young ones about. Then one fine day we had a visit from some birds. Let me tell you about it. . . ."

They listened spellbound, fuming with indignity at the thought of baby Rollo being held hostage, cheering for Sister May and her drugged strawberries, laughing aloud at the warrior ghost mouse and the terror it caused among the rooks, and finally applauding Constance and Stryk Redkite at the final struggle.

Mattimeo picked up his father's sword and offered it to Cornflower.

"Here, Mum, you should be the Champion of Red-wall!"

Matthias shook his head in amazement. "By the daw and the fur! What a brave bunch we have at our Abbey. I would dearly like to meet this Stryk Redkite."

Constance gazed fondly at Auma as she stroked the young one's headstripes. "You will, Matthias, you will, someday. Now, we must find quarters for our new friends. Sister May and Brother Rufus will open the infirmary to all, for sore paws and old wounds must be treated. I'm afraid there's no supper tonight. You'll have to go straight to bed. Anyhow, you lot look as if a long rest will do you good."

Basil's ears flopped with disappointment. "What, no supper? 1 say, Constance old fruit, the only thing that's kept B. Stag Hare on his paws for nearly a full season was the hope of a good old scoff at Redwall. I mean, what's a chap to do if he's had the old nosebag cut off, wot, wot? Bad form, old gel, t' say nothin' of rank bad manners to our guests. No supper. I don't believe it!"

Mrs. Churchmouse slapped Basil smartly upon the paw. "Mr. Stag Hare, will you kindly give your overworked jaws a rest and be quiet! Thank you. Now let me explain. The reason that we are not cooking supper is that the season is to be named first thing tomorrow: the Autumn of the Warriors' Return. All our Abbey dwellers have volunteered to work through the night, but new arrivals must sleep and keep out of the way. Starting at sunup, we are going to hold a feast in the orchard."

Basil's ears stood up like two signals. "A f-feast, y' say, marm. Will it be a big un?"

Cornflower spread her paws. "The biggest one you've ever sat down to, Basil."

"Golly! Bigger than the summer feast?"

"Far bigger!"

"An' you're all goin' to cook right through the night?"

"Oh yes, that's why we don't want you under our paws. Otherwise we might not have it ready on time."

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"Got it, maim. AU die weaiy warriors sleep while you " UP a Whackin' b»anfaMl. Right?"

Basil shot out of the Abbof s study like a rocket, calling over his shoulder as he went, "Last one in bed and fast asleep's a rotten egg. Yaaaah!"

Foremole entered the study, rubbing his nose. "Oi jus' bin a-runned over boi a mad crearur'. Hum"

Orlando laughed so hard he hurt his jaw.

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54

The feast of the Autumn of the Warriors' Return began just after dawn. Mist rose in the orchard as the sun began to mount in the sky, and rosy apples dripped dew onto the heads of the creatures who sat beneath the trees. There were far too many for tables, so the entire party sat on the grass.

Chestnuts were baked and roasted on the fire pit dug by the moles; cheeses were rolled from

the larders; fresh fruit lay in heaps between honeycombs and small hillocks of new baked bread.

Ambrose Spike tapped the casks of cider, October ale, berry wines and various fruit cordials which stood on trestles around a thick-boled beech tree.

The liberated slaves sat transfixed. They had never seen such an abundance of fare. Moles called for gangway as they trundled deeper'n'ever pies out on trolleys; long poles slung between otters wobbled under the weight of cauldrons of watershrimp and hotroot soup: hazelnut and acorn scones were laid out in rows to cool by the raspberry canes.

Mrs. Churchmouse and Cornflower barely managed to stop baby Rollo diving from a pear tree into a maple and mint cream trifle, while Mattimeo and his friends were

recapturing their lost season with other young ones from the slave pits. They dashed about, plucking wild cherries from the tops of iced cakes, and sneaking candied chestnuts from an arrangement which Sister May was making. She scolded them tongue in cheek as the intricate heap fell apart for the umpteenth time.

Jabez Stump and young Jube were discovering the delights of strawberry cordial cold from the cellars. They lay beneath a trickling barrel with their mouths open wide, only stopping to munch celery and young onion flan.

Basil Stag Hare was instructing his proteg young Cheek in the art of trencherbeastship.

"No, no, m'lad. Don't grab it all at once. Watch me. A smidgeon of fruit cake on the plate, a slice to eat now; a pawful of honeyed blackberries for yourself, and one tor your plate; a quick swig of elderberry wine, and fill your beaker with beetroot port; now, 'some of the Abbot's Redwall pie; lots of Brother Trugg's celery and woodland herb dip; compliment the old mole fellers on the deeper'n'ever pie an' they'll give you an extra-large helpin'. Right, tackle that lot, and we'll start again!"

Sp Harry was perched among the sparrows.

"Now listen and mark my words As I eat this delicious cheese. You're really quite lucky birds. To live in surroundings like these, Woodland nutcrunch, gooseberry pie, Honeybaked apples too. Bilberry pudding, my, oh my. Just swallow, don't bother to chew."

The Abbot looked apologetically over his glasses at Matthias. "There's a very nice fish baking in the pit, a grayling, like the one we caught together many seasons ago. I'm sorry I didn't wake you up to go fishing, but you were sleeping so peacefully." Matthias shook his head regretfully as he watched the

moles take the dockleaves from the steaming white fish which lay on the pit embers.

"Hmm, I've missed our fishing trips, but I forgive you. By the way, who did help you? If s more than a one-mouse job, landing a fish that size."

Sister May tugged shyly at the Warrior's habit.

"Beg pardon, Matthias, it was me. We hooked it, played it and landed it together, the Abbot and I."

"Well, I never! Sister May, you're getting a dreadful name around here. Knocking birds out with herbs and cooking pots, helping ghosts to walk, now fishing half the night after grayling on the Abbey pond. What next?"

"Taking my paw to your young Mattimeo's ear, if he keeps upsetting my candied chestnut display. If you'll excuse me," Sister May said, and hurried off.

Baby Rollo had finally succeeded in diving from the pear tree straight into the center of an oversized sliced apple and wild plum crumble. He sat smiling and eating his way out, a mass of sweet acorn crumbs and sticky fruit.

Basil Stag Hare wagged his ears in admiration. "Now there's a buck with the right idea. Here, Rollo old messmate, chuck Uncle Basil a helpin', will you? I say, marm, this Mossfiower salad is outstanding. Is that fennel you've grated in with the carrot? Excellent. My, my, what a pretty pattern of parsley and cucumber around the edge. Talented gel!"

Sister Agnes blushed at the compliments. "Oh, Mr. Stag Hare, have you tried my orchard fruit cake with the buttercup cream center?"

"Lead me to it, marm!"

Jess and Sam had taken the young squirrel Elmtail in tow. They laughed at his curiosity as he sampled everything put in front of him.

"Whaf s this one called?"

"Blueberry cream tart."

"Mmmph, great! Whaf s this nice drink?"

"Oh, thaf s cold mint and apple tea. EXyou like it?"

'Til say I do! Can I have some of that funny-looking pie?"

"Ssshh! Don't let the Abbot hear you, that's his new invention, wild cherry and glazed plum gateau with elderflower cream. He's very proud of it."

"Mmmm, so he should be, tastes marvelous. D'you use paws or a spoon?"

'Try using your mouth. Hahaha!"

Morning slid into afternoon. A gentle breeze drifted small white clouds across the serene blue expanses of sky, and the autumn sun shone down kindly upon the happy scene as the creatures of Redwall feasted through noontide, across the balmy evening until the night fires and lanterns in trees illuminated the joyous scene below. The half moon came out to watch for the sun. It shed pale light upon baby Rollo, fast asleep on Orlando's lap. The big badger's battleaxe hung from a beech tree nearby. He turned to Matthias, who was drifting off into sleep, holding Cornflower's paw.

"Warrior, I have never seen such a wondrous place as this. Look at the beautiful building, those huge safe walls, the fruit and food growing from the ground; and that pond, it glows like a silver plate in the moonlight. Aaaahhh! These contented old ones, peaceful, wise, and your young ones too, they look so happy and good. Even when I lived out on the Western Plains with my Auma, we never knew such wellbeing as this. Can you explain it to me?"

Matthias let his eyelids droop until they shut.

"Orlando, my good friend, the explanation to it all is merely one simple word: Redwall."

The badger turned to reply, but Matthias and Cornflower were asleep. He looked down at baby Rollo slumbering on his lap without a care in the world. Settling himself down, Orlando turned his face to the night sky which surrounded Mossfiower. He repeated the precious word aloud to the moon:

"Redwall!"

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Extract from the diary of Tun Churchmouse, Recorder of Redwall Abbey:

It is the summer of the Rosebay Willowherb!

Great masses of the pink mauve flowers nod their heads by the sides of our Abbey paths. Seven seasons have passed, counting the Autumn of the Warriors' Return, and this will be my second season as Recorder. John, my father, retired. He is now helping the Abbot to compile a great volume of Mossflower recipes. Strange, when I was young our Father Abbot was an old mouse, yet still he carries on changeless as ever. I think he will outlive us all.

The slaves who werefreedfrom the evil ofMalkariss have all settled here. They are our Brothers and Sisters now, and a happier band you could not meet. The Sparra colony is growing and flourishing in our roofspaces, though now it is called Warbeak Loft. Sir Harry the Muse lives up there with them. He was elected Leader and Poetry Instructor. Several times now he has resigned in despair at the Sparra language, though his love of authority always leads him to be re-elected.

Redwall is surely a place of curious happenings, not the least of which is the adoption of Cheek by Basil. There was much amusement three seasons ago when he became officially the hare's young one. Now he caus himself Cheek Stag Otter, and the impudent rascal has also adopted all Basil's manner' isms (and his appetite too).

Stryk Redkite is at present paying us a visit. She has a mate, a huge fellow named Skine, and they have their first eggchick too. Sister May was delighted at their announcement that the young one is to be named after her. However, she insists on the little female being called May and not Sissimay.

Ambrose Spike is revelling in his latest title, High Keeper of Cellar Keys, and the entire family of Jabez Stump -Rosyqueen his wife and their ten hungry daughters - are living in the wine cellar with Jube. Ambrose has put in an order to the Foremolefor the cellars to be extended, and it will be attended to immediately after the mole crew finish enlarging and lining the tunnels they dug during Ironbeak's seige. They are a useful underground system, particularly in deep winter snow.

The Guosim marched off into Mossflower again; they were born to wander. Flugg is a strong Log-a-Log, wise too, and he brings them to winter here every fourth season. They are good allies.

Rollo and Cynthia Bankvole are bellringers, just as Tess and I once were. Rollo's latest yearning is to become a squirrel and join the band of Sam and Elmtail to become part of the Mossflower Patrol. That Rollo, he will probably want to be a badger next.

Constance is getting ready to sit out in the sun and take things easy. She is teaching Auma all she knows, and some season soon Auma will become the Mother of Redwall. She is dearly loved by every creature in our Abbey. Orlando is Constance's firm friend and they are seldom apart. His axe hangs in Great Hall. As Lord of the Western Plains he only has to stand on the west battlements to survey his lands.

Last summer the Churchmouse family mas united to the Warriors, much to the delight of my mother and Cornflower. Mattimeo and my sister Tess were married. Our parents like to sit out in the sun a lot, my mother and father, Cornflower and Matthias. Like all life, they are growing no younger. They prefer to talk of the old times with friends, and that is

good. They deserve a tittle rest and peace after bringing us up, though Matthias still joins Basil and Ortando to train the defenders.

It is difficult to believe that we have all grown from young scamps into responsible creatures. But I am rambling, I will finish my writings and go outside into the sunlight, to the ceremony and the feast at the main gate. Forgive me for not telling you earlier, but today we have a new Redwall Champion and a naming party. Matthias is to place the great sword in the paws of his son Mattimeo, and he will be our Abbey Warrior from henceforth; there is one scamp who made doubly good. Did I not tell you? Tess and Mattimeo have a little son and I am an uncle!. My mother and Cornflower chose the new baby's name; he is to be called Martin.

So the legend of Redwall has come full circle, through Martin to Matthias, from Matthias to Mattimeo, and finally back to the little life we are all so proud of: Martin, Son of the Warrior. The bells are tolling for the ceremony, so you will have to pardon me for hurrying off (ite this.

May your lives be as full and happy as ours, and may the seasons be kind to you and your friends. The door of our Abbey is always open to any traveller roaming the dusty path between the woodlands and the plains.

Tim Churchmouse (Recorder of Redwall Abbey in Mossftower country).